

# Rooted in Community: Cultivating an Ecosystem of Care for Young Children and Families

Key Insights from the Best Start Learning Agenda | June 2025



# Getting Grounded

“ The concept of community power does not mean control but rather entails renewal, revitalizing, regenerating, and replenishing—creating a more beautiful community. Shifting from influencing the conditions that impact your daily life to asserting and attaining the conditions necessary to thrive. ” –Regional Network Grantee partner

Best Start—a place-based initiative funded by First 5 LA—is one of many stewards of the early childhood ecosystem in the Los Angeles region, working with communities to ensure every child prenatal to age 5 in the County is born healthy and thrives in nurturing, safe, and loving communities. Launched in 2009, the initiative has evolved with an increasing focus on building the power and agency of parents and communities to actively influence decisions that impact their lives. Best Start includes fourteen diverse communities that are organized into five regional networks, each coordinated by a Regional Network Grantee (RNG). Best Start networks support each other in times of need, share knowledge, and influence practices and resource allocations. They carefully steward the development of the broader ecosystem to improve early childhood outcomes by building community power and strengthening the fabric of communities across Los Angeles County. Core components of the Best Start regional network model include:

- Serving as **vital coordination networks** to support community engagement, cross-sector partnerships, leadership development, resource sharing, and collective action.
- Implementing local innovations and solutions driven by nonprofit and community leaders who have strengthened their skills in **root cause analysis and data driven decision-making**.
- Promoting whole family approaches that **center racial equity and healing** to promote social connection, trust, well-being, and solidarity among Best Start partners and the communities they serve.
- Mobilizing communities to **shift narratives, build public will, and promote advocacy** efforts that address the needs of families with children prenatal to age five and promote family-centered policy and systems change.
- Leveraging social networks and **local assets to develop and deliver culturally affirming services** and programs that support basic needs and well-being of young children and families.

Over the years, the Best Start model has evolved and partners have weathered the pandemic and a changing landscape. In the midst of change, they have remained firm in their commitment to cultivating relationships and better conditions for young children and families. This high-level learning brief summarizes the progress made and lessons learned from across the Best Start networks through the lens of a learning agenda. It was prepared for funders, systems leaders, nonprofit organizations, and community champions interested in understanding what it takes to strengthen the early childhood ecosystem and early childhood outcomes.



# Insights from the Best Start Learning Journey

**The Best Start Learning Agenda (BSLA)** was a participatory process that began in late 2021 and builds on First 5 LA's commitment to continuous learning – a key nutrient for a thriving ecosystem. The BSLA was co-designed and facilitated by Engage R+D and Informing Change, learning and evaluation partners of First 5 LA. The BSLA team engaged diverse Best Start partners in an exploration of what it takes to activate, build, and sustain powerful community-centered networks to improve early childhood outcomes. We also explored what power building and the network model make possible by surfacing examples from across all five regions.

The learning agenda focuses on three interconnected areas that were identified through listening sessions and interviews (see appendix for more detail). The team then facilitated additional interviews, focus groups, and learning discussions to develop a collection of interconnected case stories highlighted in this learning brief: (1) cultivating powerful community-centered networks, (2) fostering healing and community care, and (3) strengthening access to affordable housing and economic stability. The learning journey underscores that families do not live single-issue lives and many complex factors and conditions affect a child's ability to thrive.

## HIGH-LEVEL BEST START LEARNING AGENDA (2021-2024)

### Areas of Focus / Learning Questions

#### BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER

What does it take to activate, build, and sustain the power of parents and early childhood advocates working to improve outcomes for young children and families?

- What conditions, strategies, and practices support efforts to build power among parent and resident leaders?
- What will it take to ensure parents and community residents have what they need to hold leaders and institutions accountable?
- How are partners working towards long-term systems change while attending to more immediate needs in communities?

#### CENTERING HEALING AND RACIAL EQUITY

What does it take to center racial equity in practices, policies, and interactions at individual, institutional, and systems levels?

- In what ways are equity, inclusion, and anti-racism frameworks spurring changes in behaviors, mindsets, policies, and practices?
- How do we know we're making progress on racial equity efforts at the community, institutional and systems levels?
- How are promising practices being spread and shared?

#### CULTIVATING NETWORKS AND ECOSYSTEMS

What does it take to strengthen and sustain a diverse network of partners to advance family-centered systems?

- How are network relationships evolving? What capacities have been built? What facilitates and/or hinders networks?
- How are networks defining roles and navigating tensions within and across partners?
- How can First 5 LA continue to support the Best Start early childhood ecosystem?



## Key Insights:

# Cultivating Powerful Community-Centered Networks

“ We (the community) have the power to make change happen and we need processes to help us build consensus and navigate disagreement within the community. ” –Resident Promotora

### 1 The regional network model contributes to more connected and thriving partnerships.

The model has encouraged robust and coordinated networks of residents, parent leaders, and community organizations sharing resources and working toward collective goals. The networks have strengthened resource and knowledge sharing, mutual aid, leadership development, and solidarity efforts—particularly in times of crisis (e.g., pandemic response and other threats to vulnerable communities).

Best Start regional networks have expanded navigator and promotora models to connect families to resources such as food services, healthcare programs, employment, mental health services, financial assistance, and civic engagement opportunities. For example, with support from **Rising Communities** (RNG region 2) in **South Los Angeles**, community navigators conduct community outreach and staff four centers (“sustainability hubs”) connecting residents to resources and civic engagement opportunities. **In the Metro LA region, Para Los Niños** (RNG region 1) has partnered with Children’s Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA) to scale their Community Transformation Ambassador (promotora) model, connecting families to food, housing, rent and transportation assistance programs.

### 2 Parents and community residents have become powerful advocates for community priorities that improve outcomes for children prenatal to age 5.

The regional network model is building the skills, leadership, and opportunities residents need to advocate, collaborate, and implement solutions alongside organizational partners. As a result, resident leaders are active in decision-making spaces, building confidence while sharing their concerns, needs, and proposals with organizational partners and policymakers. Numerous examples of advocacy efforts are shared throughout this learning brief, but equally important is the development of leadership pipelines and civic engagement activities.

Community engagement efforts have evolved over time with increased emphasis on community power and influence. Many Best Start partners have used a variation of the Spectrum of Public Participation framework to guide engagement along a continuum.<sup>1</sup> At one end of the continuum, the community may be consulted and asked for feedback but with increasing influence and power, community members collaborate and make decisions that have a direct impact on their lives.

In addition to boosting civic engagement, leadership, and advocacy opportunities, several regions shared examples of how resident engagement and leadership development can lead to employment opportunities. For example, **Para Los Niños** employs 15 full-time staff, 76% of which are Best Start community residents, moving these residents from front-line to management positions.

<sup>1</sup> Most RNGs have used adapted variations of the Spectrum of Public Participation framework created by the International Association for Public Participation. For more information, see [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) developed by Rosa González of Facilitating Power.



“ I don’t like using the word ‘empowerment’ because I believe people already have power... I like to say “reignite” their power. When we acknowledge the strengths and massive skills they bring, that’s key. ” –Regional Network Grantee

**3 Parents and community residents are elevating solutions and actively participating in collaborative governance.** Through participatory budgeting and grantmaking practices, more resident leaders are informing local and regional priorities and resource decisions. These efforts have led to more culturally affirming approaches (e.g., promotora models) and increased resources for projects that address community priorities (e.g., food insecurity, housing, and unemployment).

With support from **The Nonprofit Partnership** (RNG region 4) **Central Long Beach** launched its first participatory budgeting (PB) process in 2020. In 2024, residents allocated \$170,000 to seven projects supporting children prenatal to age 5 and their families. Funded initiatives include economic advancement programs and a leadership academy to build residents’ organizing skills. In 2024, **Wilmington** transitioned from a leadership team-led budgeting process to a fully community-driven vote, awarding \$160,000 to local projects. With support from **El Nido Family Centers in the San Fernando Valley** (RNG region 3), Best Start residents participated in the **United in Action** participatory budgeting process, voting for projects supporting children prenatal to 5 and their families including family engagement, legal services, and workforce initiatives.



Safe Streets Promotoras celebrate the unveiling of a decorative crosswalk near Los Angeles Harbor College—marking the culmination of years of advocacy and training through the Ped Power curriculum by LA Walks and Best Start Wilmington. Read more about it here: [Wilmington’s Decorative Crosswalk Underscores the Power of Community-Driven Change](#)

## **Community-centered networks are building strategic alliances with cross-sector partners:**

Over time, regional networks have been building relationships and identifying opportunities for collective action with other institutions and partners in the ecosystem.

In **South LA, Rising Communities** (RNG region 2), supported collaboration among residents, Building Healthy Communities South LA (a place-based initiative funded by The California Endowment), and LA Community Action Network to generate an open letter to mayoral candidates during the 2022 mayoral race, articulating community needs and priorities.

In the **Antelope Valley**, child welfare policy is a top priority. With support from **Children's Bureau/All in For Kids** (RNG region 5), network partners drew inspiration from the "State of Child" report process in **Central Long Beach** and **Wilmington**, and partnered with Catalyst California to create their region's first "State of Child" report in 2023. Over 100 community residents provided direct feedback on the report to ensure it was a helpful tool for the region as they identified solutions to improve the lives of young children. The report uses a "whole child approach" to examine systems and elevates issues of housing, food insecurity, and affordable childcare. In addition to strengthening the community's capacity to use data for decision-making and advocacy, participants shared that the process was unifying and helped catalyze new partnerships. The data was sobering, but the process generated a sense of shared hope and opportunity. Given the level of interest from local institutions like the sheriffs department and school districts, the partnership is using the report to catalyze more collaboration and grow the network.

### **CROSS-CUTTING CHALLENGES AND STICKING POINTS**

Community-centered and systems change initiatives are complex and challenging endeavors. Any combination of factors can support or hinder efforts to bring about positive change. Several cross-cutting challenges that emerged through the Best Start learning journey are outlined below. These are not unique to Best Start and are often seen in other place-based initiatives.<sup>2</sup>

**Pre-existing structural inequities:** Historical inequities such as redlining and decades of disinvestment have created power imbalances. Systemic racism has contributed to a mistrust of public institutions. Best Start partners are working to acknowledge deeply-rooted inequities, explore healing practices and build the trust needed for effective collaboration.

**Leadership and representation:** Tensions can develop as new leaders or organizations emerge, which can lead to conflicts and slow progress. Strengthening individual and collective capacity to have difficult conversations and engage in generative solutions has helped alleviate the challenges associated with shared leadership. Best Start partners continuously reflect on these tensions and behaviors to help move the work forward.

**Lack of access to information and resources:** Not everyone has equal access to information, data or funding mechanisms. This can hinder collaboration and informed decision-making. Through shared leadership, Best Start regional networks have been building capacity for knowledge sharing and decision-making. They are also leveraging community wisdom and mutual aid practices to share information and resources—particularly in times of crisis and uncertainty.

**Short-term timelines vs long-term change:** Funders often operate on grant cycles while generational change requires long-term systems solutions. This mismatch creates pressure to deliver quick wins instead of investing in deep, community-led transformation. Best Start partners have also been navigating crisis response and immediate needs while also having to focus on long-term goals.

**Power in narratives and storytelling:** Whose stories are told, how they are framed, and by whom matters. Often community narratives are shaped by outsiders, reinforcing deficit-based frames rather than asset-based or healing-centered ones. Best Start partners are working to elevate community voices and stories to drive advocacy and create systems change but need help from funders and other institutions who have the resources and platforms to amplify their stories.

<sup>2</sup> For more on place-based research see <https://www.urban.org/projects/place-based-initiatives>



## Key Insights:

### Fostering Healing and Community Care

“ We can’t be all that we can be if we don’t heal the illusion of scarcity; when community comes together, there is abundance. In the words of Lakota, ‘I bring all my kin to what I do.’ We are all interconnected. ”  
– Regional Network Grantee

Healing practices and community wellness are the foundation for strong relationships and nurturing environments. Traumatic events and chronic stressors stemming from poverty, racism, and systemic inequities can cause harm and compound challenges for communities. Best Start partners have been focused on healing and repair to establish trust and foster individual and collective wellbeing. They shared three core features: 1) naming and making explicit the harms that have occurred, 2) taking steps to repair those harms when possible, and 3) restoring the social fabric of communities by nurturing interpersonal connection. Culturally affirming healing practices are woven into efforts to meet basic needs and build community power. Key takeaways and illustrative examples include:

**1 Healing is not one-size-fits-all.** The sources of harm—and the paths to healing—are diverse and complex. Best Start partners shared powerful stories of collective and intergenerational trauma, as well as harmful experiences with organizations, institutions, and systems. For both residents and partners, healing is a dynamic and multifaceted process that occurs across multiple levels: individual, family, community, organizational, and systemic. Recognizing different forms of harm is essential to supporting meaningful and inclusive healing and solidarity efforts.

Organizational partners are building their capacity to be more trauma-informed as they interact with families and community members. For example, **Children’s Bureau/All for Kids** (RNG region 5) in the **Antelope Valley** launched trauma-informed workshops to help organizational partners be better advocates for young children and families. Through a campaign-type approach, they invite all leaders to help build a “trauma-informed Antelope Valley.”

Best Start network partners also serve as critical advocates and resource connectors for health and mental health services. With support from **The Nonprofit Partnership** (RNG region 4), Best Start partners in **Long Beach** and **Wilmington** are striving to fill gaps in mental health and healing services for low-income community members who do not have access to Medi-Cal or can’t currently access therapy services. RNGs are collaborating across geographies in exciting ways to spread and scale efforts to support underserved communities. For example, **Para Los Niños** partnered with Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles, the largest public health institution for children in LA County to adopt their Community Transformation Promoter model. This active collaboration across Best Start communities has led to the recruitment of Best Start residents to serve as promotoras, working closely with social workers to support their families and connect them to concrete support. They are also working collaboratively to identify other opportunities to influence and impact policies at the local, regional and County level.

**2 Healing requires time, space, and sustained support.** Partners and residents emphasized that healing is a gradual process that unfolds differently and takes time. They highlighted the value of healing-centered spaces such as wellness centers, parks, and places of worship, where both personal and collective healing can take place. To truly support healing, long-term investments in community leadership infrastructure are essential. Additionally, understanding how healing contributes to individual and population-level outcomes will require a systems lens—one that acknowledges and embraces the many forms and spaces in which healing occurs.

With support from RNGs, Best Start networks have been fostering formal and informal spaces for parents and caregivers to participate in culturally affirming healing practices. For example, **El Nido Family Centers** (RNG region 3) in the **San Fernando Valley** hosts talking circles on environmental, social, and economic healing—a traditional practice of Native American and Indigenous cultures that honors the interconnectedness of communities. In addition to healing, these circles connect parents to resources and critical social support. A healing facilitator at El Nido noted that participants learn to recognize ways they unintentionally replicate harmful and exclusionary behaviors in their interactions with others as well as practices and techniques for engaging in more healthy and inclusive ways.

**3 Access to information and resources are essential for healing.** Accurate information is critical for understanding how systems and institutions have perpetuated harm—through practices like redlining, wealth inequality, and food insecurity. This understanding is necessary to begin repairing and transforming those systems. Best Start communities have used tools such as equity maps, historical research, and the lived experiences of community members to inform their work. These resources lay the foundation for recognition, accountability, and repair.

Best Start partners across the County are creating spaces and building capacity to overcome harmful racial tensions at the systems, community and individual levels. For example, in the **Antelope Valley** and **South LA**, RNGs are hosting workshops and creating spaces for critical dialogue that bridge differences and promote inclusion. In 2023, two regional grantees, **Para Los Niños** and **El Nido** were selected to be **Peace and Healing Centers** as part of a \$2 million pilot program funded through the City of Los Angeles' Reforms for Equity and Public Acknowledgement of Institutional Racism (L.A. REPAIR) program. These centers partner with local community-based organizations to create community spaces and culturally informed programming for environmental, economic, and social healing.

**4 Healing is fundamental to human dignity and thriving communities.** Thriving communities require a restoration of balance, wholeness, and connection. It is a pathway to reclaiming power, agency, and collective well-being. Across Best Start regions, healing is deeply intertwined with efforts to build community power and challenge systemic injustice.

Trauma and other mental health struggles can be both stigmatized and normalized, making it hard to break the cycle. Partners and RNG leads noted that culturally relevant healing helps de-stigmatize what is currently seen as taboo and challenge dominant narratives suggesting that people or certain communities are broken. Several Best Start partners shared how mental health issues can be hard to discuss within communities where stigma, fear, and shame around these issues are prevalent. As an RNG lead from South LA shared, "We all leave a footprint or have been left with prints somehow—whether that's childhood experiences we carry, trauma we've endured, or family patterns and beliefs that no longer serve us. No one ever taught us how to build relationships rooted in communication without judgment or hardship. But we can come together. We don't have to agree on everything—but there are new ways and tools we can learn to help us show up as our best selves."





## Key Insights:

# Strengthening Access to Affordable Housing and Economic Stability

Meeting the basic needs of children prenatal to age 5 is key to the healthy development and long-term well-being of young children. Best Start's community-centered networks have amplified local efforts to meet basic needs through innovative and community-driven solutions such as housing advocacy efforts and a guaranteed basic income pilot. Key takeaways from these case stories include:

**1 Housing stability directly influences children's health and well-being.** Several regional networks prioritized housing stability as part of a comprehensive approach to build a solid foundation for children's lifelong well-being and success. Elevating housing insecurity as a key early childhood issue has not been easy, but with data and determination, regional network partners are gaining traction. Nearly 60% of LA County households with young children are rent-burdened (spending more than 30% of household income on rent and utilities). These rent-burdened households are disproportionately located in Best Start communities.<sup>3</sup> Overcrowding (most often among families with young children), environmental concerns, and evictions disproportionately impact communities of color and children prenatal to 5 in LA County.

Residents who face housing challenges are leading efforts to find solutions. According to staff at the Children's Partnership, the Best Start networks have provided the connective tissue to bring residents and organizations together in important and powerful ways. "Best Start regions do an incredible job of knowing what's happening. **Para Los Niños** (RNG region 1) and **Long Beach Forward** (network partner, region 4) are on the ground working with residents, providing ongoing support—that ongoing sense of solidarity—and taking action to break that isolation," they shared. "That's what our increased political power will be built on, that kind of organizing, and with support from policy organizations and in solidarity with housing justice leaders."

<sup>3</sup> See RemakeLA. "LA City Rent Burdened Households Map."



Members of Housing for All Long Beach Community Land Trust Mayra Garcia, Jared Garcia-Cortez, Antonia Leon, Mayra Garcia-Cortez, Gary Hytrek and Gretchen Swanson pose in 14th Street Park on Dec. 15, 2022. The group filed its articles of incorporation in July 2022 to begin the process of creating a community land trust in Long Beach as a means of affordable housing. Photo Credit: Tess Kazenoff, [Long Beach Business Journal](#).

**2 Resident advocacy efforts are informing policy efforts and innovations.** As resident leaders and network partners intensified their advocacy, local municipalities began to revisit zoning policies, budgets, and other administrative hurdles to housing development. When municipal actions alone were not sufficient to improve housing access, community groups came together to help residents navigate the process of applying for Section 8 vouchers. They also advocated for innovative solutions like the creation of community land trusts.

In **Central Long Beach**, the Best Start network has prioritized affordable quality housing and economic security as fundamental to the health and well-being of children prenatal to 5. Housing advocates have been working across communities to unite residents, organizations, and coalitions to build a multicultural movement, contributing to a sea change in how the city thinks about housing. With support from **Long Beach Forward, Long Beach Residents Empowered (LiBRE), the Long Beach Housing Justice Coalition**, residents have helped shape the development of a People's Budget for Long Beach, calling on the City of Long Beach to redirect budget dollars from the Police Department to housing-related line items, including tenants' right to counsel, rental assistance, and a community land trust.

Community land trusts (nonprofits that steward land or property for the benefit of low to moderate-income community members) are another example of advocacy efforts and innovative solutions in Best Start regions. The **Housing for All Long Beach Community Land Trust (HFALB)** was created to stabilize neighborhoods and create a path for residents of color and modest incomes to become homeowners. LiBRE's Promotoras Leadership Group has introduced the concept of community land trusts and gathered input from residents in a multi-family housing community about what's most important to them. They named outdoor spaces for gatherings, a community library, and proximity to transit.

In **East and Metro Los Angeles**, residents gathered signatures for more robust financing of the Los Angeles County Affordable Housing Solutions Agency (LACHASA). LACHASA is a newly formed agency that seeks to produce more affordable housing, preserve existing affordable housing that is under threat, and protect renters who are at risk of homelessness. Southeast LA is working with CARACOL (Communities and Renters Autonomous Collective) to advocate for more affordable and quality housing in their communities, while South El Monte/El Monte are joining efforts with the San Gabriel Community Land Trust to help them solidify their foothold in the San Gabriel Valley and together advocate for community land trusts and social housing.

**3 Community-centered networks are shaping policy solutions and poverty alleviation pilots.** Families facing financial insecurity often struggle to meet basic needs like nutrition, housing, and healthcare, leading to adverse conditions that directly impact young children prenatal to 5. In addition to connecting families to resources, Best Start regions are piloting poverty alleviation efforts such as the Guaranteed Basic Income<sup>4</sup> (MR4GBI) pilot for mothers in South LA. Not only does this program provide concrete support, its shifting mindsets and narratives about deservingness.

At the behest of resident leaders and local partners, **Rising Communities** (RNG) launched the Mothers Rising for Guaranteed Basic Income (MR4GBI) pilot in 2024 to provide \$500 monthly to 100 mothers in **South Los Angeles** for two years. Financial support is complemented by personal and professional development opportunities (e.g., financial literacy, public speaking, home buyers workshops) as well as access to community navigators and resources that foster financial stability and generational wealth. The design and development of the pilot illustrate community power building in action. It was spurred by community input and informed by a study of mothers in South LA. Leveraging the **Rising Communities** and Best Start model, community delegates gathered, analyzed, and shared survey data with the community task force. Delegates then voted on programming aimed at addressing the needs identified. Community partners and participants described the program as a game changer. It has created a sense of community ownership while promoting autonomy, dignity, and respect for an individual's ability to manage financial priorities.



# Implications for the Next Growing Season

Best Start regional networks are an important part of the early childhood infrastructure and are strengthening the fabric of communities. Tangible examples include efforts to partner with communities and foster cross-sector collaboration that are influencing policies and practices at the local, regional, and county level on a range of issues. Together, these efforts create fertile ground not only to improve outcomes for young children but to benefit entire communities. Place-based and community-powered networks are a critical part of a larger county-wide strategy that addresses the different needs in communities and leverages the commonalities to build a stronger early childhood movement. With the understanding that these are ambitious and long-term endeavors, we highlight considerations for the entire ecosystem of partners—First 5 LA, philanthropic organizations, public institutions, community-based nonprofits, and residents—who are dedicated to improving the health and well-being of young children.

## **Nurture and sustain community-powered networks and cross-sector partnerships.**

Best Start regional networks are strengthening community cohesion and elevating community-driven solutions. Deep relationships and partnerships built over time are the critical root system that every forest needs to thrive. This has required intentional stewardship —efforts that become even more crucial in times of crisis when partners need to pause, reflect, heal, and realign their strategies. Successful collaboration is only possible when trust has been established—not just among organizations, but also between community leaders, residents, funders, and public officials.

**Funders and other institutional partners should invest in existing community leadership infrastructure, support regional coordination efforts, and strengthen cross-sector partnerships that center community wisdom and expertise.** This is particularly important in Los Angeles County, the most populous county in the nation and home to approximately 500,000 children prenatal to 5.

## **Honor and support for community priorities and community-owned decision-making.**

Best Start regional networks advocate for policies, practices, and resources that create safe and family-friendly environments. Not only do these efforts remove barriers and improve conditions, but they increase civic engagement, build momentum, and strengthen the leadership of community residents. These efforts have helped elevate community priorities and tackle disparities across a range of intersecting issues that impact young children—from access to quality child care and health care to stable housing and economic security. Innovative approaches like **participatory budgeting** are taking root and building the capacity, confidence and commitment of community leaders to engage in impactful decision-making opportunities.

The ripple effects of these investments can be significant. As one RNG lead shared, “When communities feel they are being invested in, they will in turn give back at least twofold.” **Funders and organizational partners should continue to prioritize authentic and reciprocal relationships where power and decision-making are shared with those most affected by the issues they seek to address.**

<sup>4</sup> Guaranteed Basic Income (GBI) programs provide unconditional, recurring cash payments to individuals or families, designed to support basic financial needs and improve quality of life. These cash payments are provided on a predictable schedule to support budgeting for ongoing expenses like rent, utilities, or childcare.

“ We need a huge push for policy engagement, not just education... My big hope is that Black, brown, the global majority—we start working together intentionally and strategically. We need to come together. ”

– Resident Leader

## **Embrace efforts to shift mindsets and narratives.**

Place-based initiatives require more than funding and programming—they require a fundamental shift in how communities, funders and institutions perceive power, expertise, and solutions. First 5 LA made an intentional shift to a network-based model where decision-making is more inclusive and centers community voice and lived experience.

That transition has not been an easy journey. It has required deep reflection about dominant norms and engrained mindsets. Taking the time to reflect and heal has helped renew appreciation for culturally affirming healing practices and community stories, while challenging assumptions and encouraging more equitable partnerships and policies.

**Invest in narrative change strategies and document what is working and what can be further learned from these efforts.** Without shifts in mindsets and narrative, community-centered initiatives risk reinforcing the same power imbalances they seek to address.

## **Leverage the influence of key partners to amplify community stories and connect communities to other funding opportunities.**

Beyond providing funding, First 5 LA and other institutional partners can support community-based organizations as advocates, conveners, and capacity-builders. For instance, philanthropic organizations like First 5 LA can engage policymakers and advocate for public funding, legislative support, and systems reforms that sustain community-led initiatives beyond grant cycles. Funders can help amplify stories of progress related to participatory grantmaking and poverty alleviation programs like guaranteed basic income.. They can build bridges between communities and government agencies to ensure community voices are heard at decision-making tables. They can convene learning spaces to share knowledge and foster collaboration.

Funders have a unique opportunity to step in where state and federal entities may fall short. Now more than ever, community-based organizations working directly with historically marginalized communities need sustained support to weather difficult times. Funders should step into their role not just as financial contributors, but as strategic allies and stewards supporting a diverse and interdependent ecosystem.

“ Sometimes people feel disengaged, ignored and neglected. We're able to bridge that gap for community members and therefore help children zero to five.... I have grown to see myself not only as a better advocate, but also as a mentor. Hopefully I can create systems change through my story and narrative. ”

– Resident Leader



# Acknowledgements

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# Appendix:

## Best Start Regional Networks

Below is a brief overview of how each regional network functions and what they prioritize.

1

### REGION 1: EAST LOS ANGELES, METRO LOS ANGELES, SOUTH EL MONTE/EL MONTE, SOUTHEAST LOS ANGELES

Best Start Region 1 (BSR1) is led by the Community Transformation Collective (CTC), a community-driven movement supported by [Para Los Niños](#). This region brings together over 1000 community partners and cross-sector organizational partners across five communities in Los Angeles to identify and implement community building strategies. CTC helps community members transform systemic conditions so that children, families, and neighborhoods can thrive, and where community leaders participate in decision-making. The region's systems change approach builds and cultivates transformational partnerships for the region to co-design, implement, communicate, mobilize, and evaluate strategies.

Para los niños



for the children

A notable community-driven innovation includes the scaling of their promotora model in partnership with Children's Hospital of Los Angeles. BSR1's new five-year strategic plan will address: 1) Quality, Affordable, and Stable Housing; 2) Transforming Systems of Care; 3) Scaling our Community Transformation Promoter Workforce Pipeline; 4) Food Security Pathways; and other efforts to better support BIPOC families. Learn more about BSR1's community building efforts, along with [community spotlights](#) that highlight resident leader stories.

2

### REGION 2: SOUTH LOS ANGELES (WEST ATHENS, WATTS/WILLOWBROOK, MANCHESTER/BROADWAY, COMPTON/EAST COMPTON)

With the support of [Rising Communities](#), Best Start South Los Angeles brings together community leaders and organizations across four communities to provide leadership development, access to education and resources, and build capacity for movement building. This region's infrastructure includes a Regional Task Force with elected community leaders who lead outreach for community-based grantmaking and mobilizing efforts. Community leaders (also known as delegates who make up the Steering Committee), lead monthly meetings and community-specific projects that address priority issues.



Current priorities include equal access to affordable healthy food and affordable housing, economic resiliency, culturally appropriate mental health services and prevention programs, community education, and youth development programming. This region is actively implementing the Guaranteed Basic Income initiative, which provides unrestricted cash payments to families so they can access basic needs. The region also incorporates a Community Navigator model to help connect community members to resources. Learn more about Best Start South Los Angeles [here](#).

## 3

## REGION 3: SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

**El Nido** provides support across the San Fernando Valley region by offering cross-community coordination, cross community learning, collective advocacy, and regional resource mobilization. This regional strategy has strengthened the infrastructure and capacity of residents to engage in sustainable systems change alongside advocacy groups and service providers. Regional mobilization primarily occurs through network convening spaces and their participatory budgeting process. Best Start San Fernando Valley leads and implements a shared philosophy, which is rooted in trauma-informed care and collective well-being using the “Trenza Approach.” This approach weaves together three braided strategies: shared well-being, economic opportunities, and access to and utilization of family resources, all with a focus on the Seven Protective Factors. This region’s focus on collective healing has helped deepen their partnership’s understanding of generational, systemic and collective trauma in communities of color. This critical analysis of collective harm has led to discovering new strategies to re-establish harmony, balance, and solidarity in community to more effectively advance systems change. The initiative has also supported community identity projects, the Promotora Initiative, and non-traditional leadership courses through their partnership with LA Mission College. Learn more about Best Start San Fernando Valley’s Regional Network [here](#).

**elnido**  
FAMILY  
CENTERS

## 4

## REGION 4: CENTRAL LONG BEACH AND WILMINGTON (PORT CITIES)

**The Nonprofit Partnership** manages the Best Start port cities of Long Beach and Wilmington to advance their systems change priorities in collaboration with resident leaders, Long Beach Forward (offering localized support for Central Long Beach), Providence Little Company of Mary (offering localized support to Wilmington), and other key stakeholder groups. With a focus on accessing quality childcare, housing, and economic security; preventing child abuse and neglect; and reducing crime and intergenerational poverty, this region is building its capacity to implement power-building strategies. Specifically, the Port Cities network structure includes resident leadership development and organizational capacity building, community-driven practices such as participatory budgeting, spaces for collective action to take root (e.g., learning convenings, communities of practice, and data convenings), and collaboration with elected officials, funders, and commissioners to help advance policy/systems change. Learn more about the Port Cities region [here](#).

**tnp**  
the nonprofit partnership

## 5

## REGION 5: ANTELOPE VALLEY

**All for Kids** (formerly Children’s Bureau of Southern California) supports coordination between the Lancaster and Palmdale communities to strengthen their network’s capacity to mobilize resources, engage in cross-regional learning, build data capacity, leadership development, and engage in collective advocacy. Regional meetings bring together community leaders, organizational partners, and decision-makers to strengthen collaboration and identify opportunities to advance key priorities such as early childhood development, child abuse prevention, and trauma-informed initiatives (“Trauma Informed Antelope Valley”). Resident leaders are provided with numerous opportunities to engage in learning, advocacy, and decision-making by participating the in policy committee, data committee, and informing the implementation of the region’s State of the Child Report. Learn more about Best Start Antelope Valley [here](#).

**all for kids**

# Methods and Limitations

The **Best Start Learning Agenda** (BSLA) was co-designed and facilitated by **Engage R+D** and **Informing Change** (the BSLA team). Through a participatory process beginning in 2021, the BSLA team engaged diverse Best Start partners in an exploration of what it takes to activate, build, and sustain the power of parents and organizational partners to improve early childhood outcomes.

## DISCOVERY PHASE

During the first year of the project, the BSLA team reviewed existing background documents, interviewed program officers (POs) from the First 5 LA Communities team, Best Start consultants and Regional Network Grantees (RNGs) leads. The discovery phase also brought together a larger and more diverse group of community partners to ensure a more participatory and inclusive process. Planning conversations with RNGs and other CBO partners helped us consider barriers and trade-offs for who and how to engage diverse partners. These sessions were emergent and encouraged curiosity. They allowed partners to take stock and reflect on past work as well as emergent questions to inform future efforts.

## DISCOVERY SESSION PROCESS: PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT AND ADAPTATIONS

Discovery sessions were designed with input from the First 5 LA Communities team and representatives from each RNG organization. An adaptive approach was used to accommodate the composition, language, and engagement preference of regional networks, but included residents, community leaders, grassroots leaders, and organizational partners. We worked closely with RNGs and other CBO partners to leverage existing meetings, relationships, and communication channels to reach out to community members and minimize burden.

Discovery sessions were held with the First 5 LA team, as well as separate sessions with RNG, other CBO partners, and residents from Best Start Regions 2, 3, 4, and 5. For Region 1, we attended existing community meetings instead of facilitating a separate session. From these dialogues, we gathered and organized a common set of meaningful questions that held resonance across the various regions and participants. These questions were organized in several broad domains and then prioritized in collaboration with a grantee advisory group. The advisory group (referred to as the “sandbox”) included approx. 12 participants from across Best Start regions.

With the support and guidance of the grantee advisory group, we finalized the Learning Agenda which was shared at an in-person Learning Summit in 2023 to validate, surface new reflections, and plan for the data collection phase. The Learning Summit provided the opportunity to develop the three areas of exploration (i.e., community power building, centering racial equity, and cultivating ecosystem networks). As we gathered data, four case stories emerged which were further developed through additional interviews, focus groups and secondary data sources.



## CASE STORY METHODS

The case stories were identified in collaboration with RNG leads and focused facilitators and challenges in developing the network model and documenting what the network model has made possible. We primarily used qualitative research techniques, such as interviews via snowball sampling (interviewees referred us to others with knowledge of the topic), focus groups, scan of organizational websites and social media sites, and literature reviews. Our key informants included RNG staff, the staff of other partner organizations, field experts, and community participants with lived expertise. Participants were provided with an honorarium for their time.

Across the four case stories, and drawing from all five Best Start regions, **70 individuals**, including both community leaders and representatives of at least **26 different organizations** in addition to First 5 LA, participated in the interviews and focus groups. A subset of RNG leads also reviewed and provided commentary on the drafts of the case studies. It is important to note that an attempt was made to balance representation of different Best Start regions across the case stories as a whole. If the work of one region is featured more prominently in a case story, we typically didn't feature that region in the other case stories, even if they also do work on those issues. Thus, the case studies cannot be read as an exhaustive accounting of all activities on these topics across all regions.

## Limitations and Opportunities for Future Inquiry

The focus of the case stories is to explore areas of work that are important to the Best Start story and to answer learning questions identified by the community-vetted learning agenda. It is not a traditional evaluation. It explores what is changing in Best Start regions and some of the drivers of those changes, but it does not attempt to attribute those changes solely to First 5 LA or its regional partners.

Community-based data collection methods rely on the experiences and perspectives of community members. This generates a non-exhaustive list of perspectives as it is not possible to speak with all community members. Thus, not all evidence of progress was able to be collected.

Due to limitations of time and capacity at the regional level, we were not able to secure equal representation of community members from all regions in the interview process, however we were able to explore all three areas of inquiry. We supplemented our community interviews and focus groups with literature reviews, media scans (e.g, social media sites, organizational websites and news articles) to round out our understanding of the context and points raised by interviewees.