



First 3 Years of the Journey

**How Boston, Chattanooga, Yonkers, and Pickens County
Set out to Enhance Early Childhood Development at Scale**

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The first of three reports to the Bernard van Leer Foundation

Contents

Executive Summary	3
The Start in Boston	4
What the Cities are Learning	5
Introduction	8
The Context	8
The Aspirational Model behind the Examples in this Report	9
The Basics and Collective Impact	13
Methodology for this Implementation Study.....	15
Selection of Cities	15
Data Collection	15
Four Local Campaigns	17
Boston, Massachusetts.....	17
Pickens County, South Carolina	26
Chattanooga, Tennessee	32
Yonkers, New York.....	37
Themes across the Four Communities	43
Getting Started	43
Integrating The Basics into the Community	44
Data for Tracking Impacts.....	46
Delivering Training at Scale to Frontline Providers	47
Conclusion	49

Executive Summary

Brain development is extremely responsive to human interaction during early childhood, but too often infants and toddlers from less advantaged backgrounds receive less of the stimulation they need to reap the greatest benefit.

Partly as a consequence, cognitive-skill gaps develop by the age of two between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, with disparities well established when a child's life journey is less than half the way to kindergarten.

What can be done?

This report tells how civic leaders from Boston, MA, Chattanooga, TN, Pickens County, GA, and Yonkers, NY, are pursuing an ambitious vision: to empower parents from all types of backgrounds, eventually at scale, with the knowledge and inspiration to incorporate the five Basics (see below) into their parenting, in order to give children aged birth to three a strong start toward becoming smart, happy, and successful human beings.

The Basics are five pillars of early-childhood parenting, distilled from research by the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard University, with the aid of a national advisory committee of early childhood scholars:

1. Maximize Love, Manage Stress
2. Talk, Sing, and Point
3. Count, Group, and Compare
4. Explore Through Movement and Play
5. Read and Discuss Stories

Rather than sound an alarm that inspires fear, The Basics movement calls attention to an opportunity that all parents have to help shape their children's brains.

The report is based on interviews, observations, and relevant documents. It is the first of three reports commissioned by the Bernard van Leer Foundation as a way of harvesting lessons from Basics campaigns.

The four cities covered in this report (here we will refer to Pickens County as a city) were selected from more than two-dozen others, because of their differences from one another, their accomplishments, and because they were among the first to launch local Basics campaigns.

The core shared goals are to:

- i. increase broad awareness of The Basics;
- ii. help parents and caregivers understand how to use The Basics for supporting early brain development;
- iii. inspire parents and caregivers to routinely use The Basics, especially with children aged birth to three; and ultimately,
- iv. improve early childhood outcomes, including kindergarten readiness, at the whole-community level.

The Start in Boston

The Boston Basics campaign was spear-headed by the Black Philanthropy Fund (BPF) in collaboration with the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University. The BPF is a group of highly successful senior African Americans who use their time and finances to promote educational achievement.

Beginning with videos, booklets, posters, and workshops developed during 2015 and early 2016, there was a formal Boston Basics kickoff event in September, 2016.

The plan was to refine the design and implementation of the model in Boston, with the hope of eventually spreading it to other cities after the approach was well-developed, ideally with demonstrated results.

Within months, however, and without any active outreach, civic leaders in other cities were drawn to the vision, the framework, and the tools.

Leaders in Chattanooga, TN were the first, but soon others joined in proposing that, “We can figure it out together!” The core ideas would be the five Basics and the goal of reaching parents through pre-existing community-level relationships.

Less than a year after Boston’s launch, all three other cities in this report were part of what has become the *Basics Learning Network* (BLN). Chattanooga and Pickens County were among 11 communities that attended a daylong Boston Basics workshop in December, 2016. Those two and Yonkers were featured more recently at the May 2018 convening, by which time there were 25 communities in the BLN.

In a number of places, civic leaders had been looking for a package like The Basics to cover the period from birth to age three (or in some cases five) and now they would not need to invent it.

Caregiving concepts needed to be simple enough for parents to understand, yet not to completely neglect important topics. Implementation ideas needed to be flexible enough to be adaptable, but not so flexible as to be incoherent. And dissemination needed to target whole communities, not just narrow segments.

All BLN communities are using the videos and other materials developed for the Boston Basics, typically relabeled with the name of their own city. The first generation of tools, developed during 2015 and 2016, included an introductory overview video and another for each of The Basics; booklets with parenting tips; handouts; and a workshop series for helping parents learn The Basics.

[The second-generation toolkit](#), developed in 2017 and early 2018, added activity guides and handouts for working with parents; videos and implementation guides for the medical sector; and general guides for planning and tracking progress. Tools are modular and can be used in different ways and combinations.

What the Cities are Learning

The Basics Campaign in each city is organized in a manner reflecting the social and political positions of the people and organizations that brought it to the city.

The group that introduced the Basics to Boston was a partnership of the BPF and the AGI. In Chattanooga, it was a collective impact initiative called Chattanooga 2.0, in which organizations like the local chamber of commerce and United Way played key convening roles. In Pickens County, SC, it was First Steps, a public-private partnership organization supported by the state government to support young parents and children and the community-based organizations that assist them. And in Yonkers, it was the public-school system.

In each case, a local backbone organization or coalition was formed to set strategy and create arrangements through which others could play their organizational and personal roles.

All four coalitions were positively received when they approached local decision makers with the idea of doing a Basics campaign.

Each organized a kickoff event that was well attended, generated publicity using broad-based media, and put in place arrangements to introduce The Basics to parents and caregivers and support them to use all five with infants and toddlers.

There have been several themes as the efforts have begun to mature.

Dedicated Staffing. All four Basics campaigns began their work using borrowed staff from the host organizations, supplemented by volunteers.

They needed more capacity. Staying in touch with organizations that are sharing The Basics with families, in order to give those organizations encouragement and sometimes technical assistance, requires more paid staffing than the campaigns initially allocated. The same is true for marketing and communications, fundraising, and other functions where staffing assigned specifically to The Basics is a necessity, if only part time.

Each city has begun filling the staffing gap and is seeking ways to supplement human resources, including through technology.

Sending Trusted Envoys. Because people in many different positions are being asked to respond, there is a need to establish rapport at every level, from the senior civic and business leaders who control resources and authorizations, to the front-line professionals who work with families, to the families themselves.

Routine, enthusiastic sharing of The Basics with families takes place most reliably when front-line professionals perceive that the individuals making the request—those asking them to share The Basics routinely with families—are not only committed themselves to front-line service, but will also visit once in a while to provide advice and encouragement.

Hiring program personnel who are well known and respected locally as social workers or other types of human service providers, and whose job is to be present in the community, has helped increase rapport and a genuine sense of partnership with front-line local service providers.

Formalizing Agreements. For the first year or two of each campaign, local leaders in each city were excited to spread the word about The Basics and to enlist organizations to agree they would make sharing The Basics part of their routine communications with parents and caregivers of infants and toddlers. However, only one has systematically documented those commitments.

All four cities are entering a phase in which they will more consistently document commitments and activities.

Technological Capacity to Reach Scale. There will never be sufficient capacity for universal face-to-face training. Therefore, The Basics, Inc. is taking initial steps to develop an online or blended-learning system for front-line staffers from organizations across the BLN.

Online trainings and certifications that all BLN communities can use will greatly increase the capacity of the whole network to prepare front-line service providers to incorporate The Basics into their work.

With such a system in place, the staffers of a local Basics campaign might convene larger workshops a few times a year to compliment the online system, while checking in occasionally with organizations to seek feedback and express appreciation for their continuing engagement.

Marketing, Communications, and Social Media. Communication issues are not a focus of this report. However, each community has used multiple forms of outreach. A future report will address this issue more extensively.



Plenary session of the May 2018 convening of leaders from cities, towns, and counties of the Basics Learning Network.

Introduction

More than 80 percent of children who enter school *kindergarten ready* master basic reading and math skills by the age of 11, but the same applies for fewer than half of their less well-prepared classmates.¹

This and related facts—for example, that cognitive skill gaps between socioeconomic groups are stark by the age of two—are the inspirations for this report and this project.

The unmet challenge is greatest for the first three years. Access to quality preschools for four-year-olds is increasing and might someday even be universal, but there is not yet a systematic way to address the learning needs of children aged birth to three at scale, before they reach preschool.

The Context

The first local Basics campaign began developing in Boston in 2015 as a collaboration of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University (AGI) and the Black Philanthropy Fund (BPF).

The intention was to refine and prove the model first in Boston, but even the early version resonated with leaders in other cities who were looking to fill gaps in community support for children ages birth to age three.

Beginning less than a year after Boston's formal kickoff in 2016, spanning through the present in late 2018, civic leadership groups in more than 30 cities, towns, and counties in the US and abroad have launched local Basics campaigns to work in parallel, using the core framework and tools developed in Boston, learning together in what is now called the *Basics Learning Network* (BLN).

In 2017, the Boston team launched a non-profit organization, The Basics, Inc., to consolidate oversight for the Boston campaign and provide support for the BLN as a whole.

This is the first in a series of three reports over the coming year in which we will track campaigns in four communities—Boston, Massachusetts; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Pickens County, South Carolina; and Yonkers, New York—with the goal of expanding the knowledge base for leaders in communities who are working to mount their own Basics efforts.

¹ Estimates are from Pathways to the middle class: Balancing personal and public responsibilities by Isabel V. Sawhill, Scott Winship, and Kerry Searle Grannis, 2012, Center on Children and Families at Brookings. Available here: www.brookings.edu/research/pathways-to-the-middle-class-balancing-personal-and-public-responsibilities/

Through interviews with key informants, observations, and examination of relevant documents, we will identify themes, challenges, and opportunities for launching and sustaining effective campaigns to reach entire communities.

This report describes how leadership groups in each of the four communities recruited allies and began building capacity for spreading the five Basics. The second report in the series will focus on organizations that directly engage families and how they integrate Basics concepts and resources into their work. The third and final report will update the interim reports and characterize how The Basics campaign in each locality is developing into a system. It will include lessons and recommendations for stakeholders at multiple levels of The Basics movement.

The Aspirational Model behind the Examples in this Report

“The Basics” are five parenting and caregiving pillars that encompass much of what experts recommend for promoting high quality cognitive and social-emotional development from birth to age three:

1. Maximize Love, Manage Stress
2. Talk, Sing, and Point
3. Count, Group, and Compare
4. Explore through Movement and Play
5. Read and Discuss Stories

Experts and non-experts alike are drawn to this formulation, because it balances comprehensiveness, sophistication, and simplicity. Each Basic is a good “grain size” to be digestible, but still contain content that is developmentally nuanced.

Stakeholders in The Basics movement aim to do four things:

- i. increase broad awareness of The Basics;
- ii. help parents and caregivers understand how to use The Basics for supporting early brain development;
- iii. inspire parents and caregivers to routinely use The Basics, especially with children aged birth to three; and ultimately,
- iv. improve early childhood outcomes, including kindergarten readiness, at the community level.

To achieve these goals, the AGI first collaborated with allies over several years to distill the five core pillars from the science, then build a constellation of tools that communities can use to engage and teach parents and caregivers.

The tools and advice reach each community through a local “backbone,” or coordinating organization or coalition. The Basics, Inc. serves as the national backbone organization. It is also the local backbone for Boston, with some staff who work exclusively on the Boston campaign.

The Basics, Inc. supplies the core Basics framework, branding assets and website support (for some BLN cities), tools and materials for engaging partner organizations and families, including at an annual network-wide convening.

The Basics, Inc. is still building capacity to play these roles in a more robust way, include through monitoring and evaluation tools and guidance, technical assistance to local campaign leaders, and facilitation of cross-network sharing.

The work of local backbone coalitions is primarily “wholesale” rather than “retail.” Leveraging tools provided by The Basics, Inc., local leaders help recruit and prepare staff at partner organizations—for example, doctors’ offices, child care centers, libraries, churches—to integrate The Basics into existing workflows when they interact with families.

This is amplified with broad-based communications and marketing. The goal is “*socioecological saturation*,” where parents and caregivers routinely experience reinforcement for using The Basics of early childhood caregiving with their children in multiple parts of the family’s social ecology.

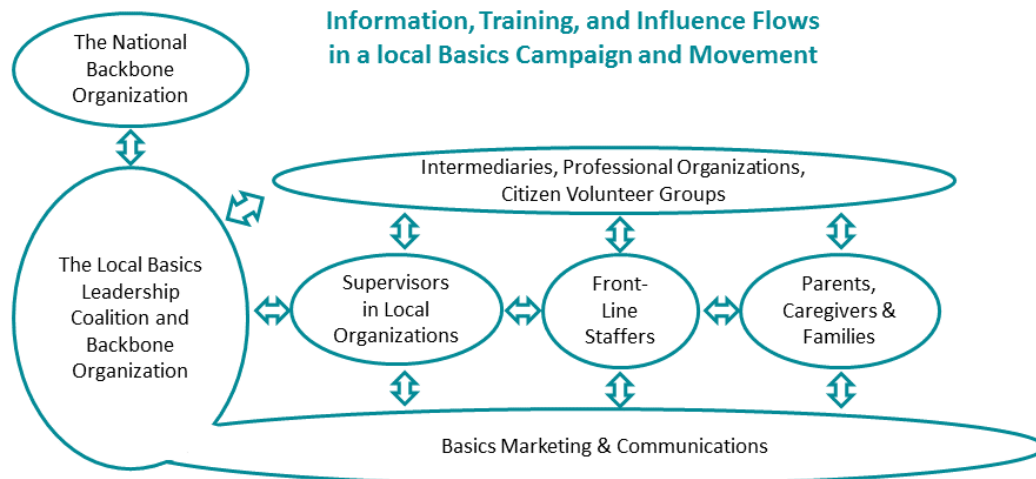
Some elements of what The Basics, Inc. offers are “core” or constant across participating communities, including adherence to the phrasing of the five Basics. However, most elements are flexible.

Over time, the bundle of resources and supports, along with what is considered core versus flexible, are likely to evolve as lessons accumulate regarding what is most effective or in the event that distinctions are drawn to distinguish different levels of BLN membership.

Figure 1 below depicts dynamic relationships in a local Basics campaign, beginning on the left-hand side with communication between The Basics, Inc. and the local backbone. Then there are multiple channels through which the local backbone can influence families.

The most direct is through marketing and communications. However, the local back-bone can also work through intermediaries, membership organizations, and citizen volunteer groups.

Figure 1



For example, a regional association of health centers is an intermediary through which a backbone can reach individual health centers, while a central library is an intermediary through which a backbone can reach neighborhood branch locations. Similarly, professional organizations and citizen volunteer groups (or “working groups” or “advisory boards”) can help spread The Basics.

Finally, there is communication between the local backbone, supervisors in local organizations, frontline staffers in those organizations, and parents and caregivers.

In this local system, the backbone is responsible for setting the strategy, recruiting influential allies and partners, and coordinating efforts to build capacity with partner organizations and the community at large to share The Basics.

In order to speed development of proof-point organizations that become prime examples of how to incorporate The Basics into routine operations, the backbone may provide deeper support for organizations that seem ready to play such a catalytic role, including:

- Helping identify who at the organization will “own” The Basics initiative, then assisting that individual (or individuals) to plan the approach for their organization;
- Securing and documenting their commitment to integrate The Basics;
- Ensuring that staff have the necessary preparation to play their roles;
- Providing access to resources for engaging families, including videos, workshop guides, tip-sheet handouts, and others; and
- Monitoring progress through periodic check-ins and data collection.

Just how many organizations can receive such intensive support, and in which sectors, depends upon the capacity and priorities of the backbone. Organizations that receive less intensive support still have access to all of the online tools, but less personalized contact from Basics staff.

At the community level, the local backbone engages in broad-based communication that amplifies the work on the ground. This may include billboards, news articles, social media, and large convenings.

The *aspirational model* above has come into focus over time. Some aspects were conceived specifically from the very beginning, but others are gaining clarity with experience.

The Basics and Collective Impact



If a child described a horse to a friend and then that friend saw a camel, the friend might believe he was observing what the first child had described. Horses and camels are similar in all of the ways that a child might tend to describe them. Still, a horse is not a camel.

Similarly, the strategic approach of The Basics movement is very similar to what leading thinkers in the “collective impact” movement describe, but does it equate to collective impact? Depending on how collective impact is defined, The Basics approach may be a camel.

A 2011 publication by John Kania and Mark Kramer in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* is perhaps the seminal publication that sparked the collective impact movement. Of course, there were earlier examples to use as illustrations, but what the article offered was a concise and compelling justification for the approach, along with semantics and conceptual specificity that inspired wide-spread interest in the idea.

Authors Kania and Kramer wrote:

Collective Impact Initiatives are long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Their actions are supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization.

They described backbone organizations as follows:

The backbone organization requires a dedicated staff separate from the participating organizations who can plan, manage, and support the initiative through ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly.²

² John Kania and Mark Kramer, Winter 2011, “Collective impact,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 36-41.
Available here: https://ssir.org/images/articles/2011_WI_Feature_Kania.pdf

In most respects, The Basics approach is taking on the contours of collective impact. There is an emerging measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication. The Basics, Inc. is a young backbone organization for the Boston Basics and for the BLN as a whole. In addition, each BLN campaign has its own local backbone, starting typically as a loosely organized coalition, then maturing to have a small paid staff and other more codified structures.

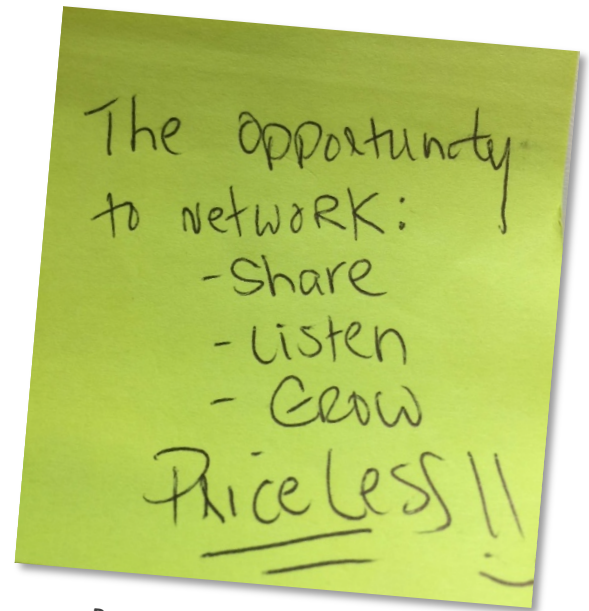
However, one key aspect of The Basics model distinguishes it from a standard definition of collective impact.

Specifically, a central idea in collective impact models, take for example the prominent [Strive Together](#) model, is that local actors decide on a shared goal, then embark together to find a way to achieve it.

Rather than *being* a collective impact approach, The Basics approach has been *incorporated into* local collective impact efforts, as an answer to the question, “What can we do in our community to address the first three years of life, prior to preschool?”

The Basics framework and tools are resources that make it unnecessary for local collective impact coalitions to invent their own models.

Leaders from around the U.S. and abroad have learned about the Boston Basics and have asked to bring the framework and tools to their own communities. Across the BLN, local backbone organizations are learning, together with Boston, how to infuse the five Basics of early childhood caregiving throughout their home communities.



Post-it note from the May 2018 Basics National Convening.

Methodology for this Implementation Study

This initial report uses qualitative approaches to document and analyze Basics campaign formation and leadership. Such methods are particularly useful for the study of implementation processes and for discerning how features of local context influence strategic decisions.

Selection of Cities

We selected four specific communities to feature, for the following reasons. First, they were among the earliest four communities to launch their own Basics campaigns. Therefore, they have longer records of accomplishment to analyze compared to others that started more recently, many within the past year.

Second, they differ by region, population, and urbanicity. Boston is a relatively large city in the Northeast; Chattanooga and Yonkers are mid-sized cities in the South and Northeast respectively; and Pickens County is a relatively small, rural county in the Southeast.

Finally, each has a distinct type of organization at the heart of its backbone coalition.

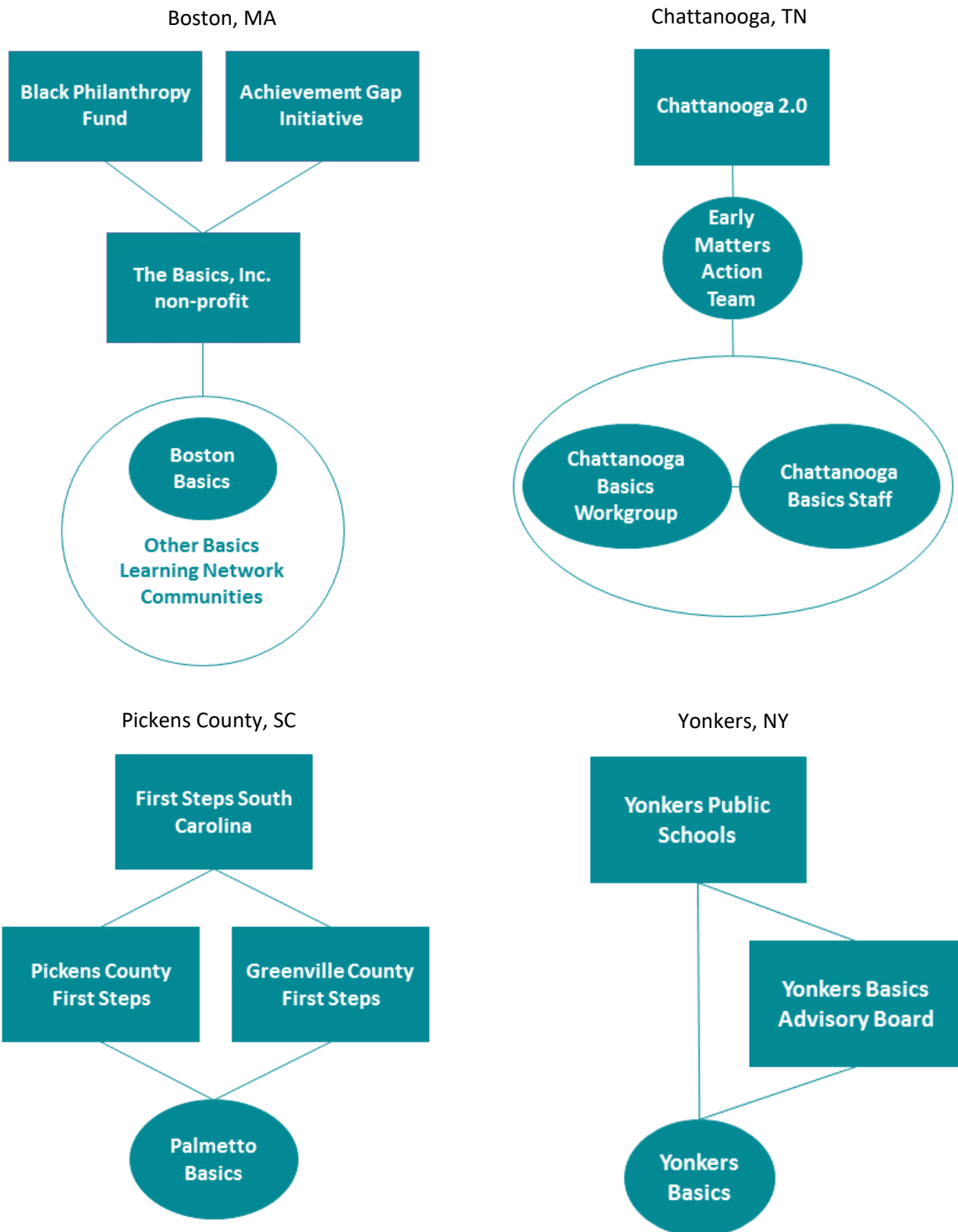
By selecting across these dimensions, we gain a rich sample of the ways that context can affect the roll-out and ongoing development of local Basics campaigns.

Data Collection

To date, we have completed an initial round of interviews with members of the backbone coalition in each community. We have also reviewed key documents, including meeting agendas and notes, sample partnership agreements between local backbone organizations and partners, and correspondence.

Moving forward, we will use snowball sampling to identify additional key informants in each community. We will seek representation from multiple sectors as well from different roles in selected organizations, not just organization leaders, but also frontline providers who engage directly with families.

Institutional/Organizational Structures of the Four Local Basics Campaigns in the Report



Four Local Campaigns

This section reveals how each of four communities launched a Basics campaign and set out to engage other stakeholders in reaching parents and early-childhood caregivers with information and supports. The stories appear in the sequence that they started their campaigns, beginning with Boston.

Boston, Massachusetts

The [Boston Basics](#) campaign began to take shape in early 2015 as a collaboration between the AGI and the BPF. BPF members are senior African Americans aiming to pay their good fortunes forward, by making positive differences in the lives of black and disadvantaged children.



The year 2016 saw a formal kickoff event and lots of presentations and trainings. In 2017, after the Boston Basics had operated for more than a year without a unified institutional home and the BLN had begun, the BPF created The Basics, Inc. to serve as the backbone organization for both the Boston Basics and the BLN.

The Boston story below refers often to “the team,” in reference to the inner circle of staff and volunteers who help make the decisions and execute the work of The Basics, Inc.

Backstory

After developing the five Basics with an advisory committee, the AGI received a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2015 for a demonstration project of a cross-sector, community-level approach to promoting effective caregiving for infants and toddlers in a single Boston neighborhood.

When BPF leaders Jeff Howard and Wendell Knox learned of the project, they were shocked to find out that achievement gaps are apparent by the age of two. Both were convinced that the issue was important enough to warrant a citywide effort—which they committed to help fund and lead.

Howard and Knox are experienced CEOs who had access to top public and private sector officials, which proved essential in forging early strategic partnerships, as well as in subsequent engagements with key institutions such as the city’s large hospitals and health centers.

Within weeks of deciding to move forward, BPF volunteers lead by Howard and Knox joined forces with the AGI's Ron Ferguson at Harvard, and started recruiting key allies for a Basics leadership coalition. These included Boston's Mayor; the CEO of WGBH Public Broadcasting; senior officials at Boston Children's Museum; and the pediatrics department at Boston Medical Center.

The Mayor directed line agencies, including the Boston Public Health Commission and the Boston Centers for Youth and Families, to help disseminate The Basics. The CEO of WGBH committed to help develop Boston Basics media. Boston Children's Museum committed to provide meeting space for Basics convenings and include Basics materials and ideas in messaging to the parents of young children. And the Boston Medical Center was among the first organizations to begin reaching families with The Basics, through their maternity unit.

There were also some critically important early seed funders. Perhaps most prominent was Partners HealthCare.

According to Knox, "That endorsement by Partners, the state's largest health care institution, together with its modest but meaningful financial support, had significant impact on our ability to mobilize allies both within the healthcare sector and beyond."

Initial Meetings with the Early Childhood Sector

From the beginning, the vision has been to reach parents of infants and toddlers through multiple types of institutions. However, the first meetings were with the professionals who were already the most focused on young children: leaders in the early childhood sector.

Boston has a tight-knit network of highly skilled and dedicated early childhood educators and family engagement professionals. Multiple times in the past, most recently through the *Thrive in 5* initiative, they have organized communities to focus on early childhood caregiving.

Philanthropic and public sector support for such efforts have not been sustained over long periods, even though the data make it clear that there is still work to do: approximately 40 percent of the city's kindergarteners do not meet readiness benchmarks.³

³ Data are from the 2017 annual report card of the Boston Opportunity Agenda.
Available here: https://www.tbf.org/-/media/tbforg/files/reports/boa_annual_report_1242017.pdf?la=en

In other parts of the country—in Tennessee or South Carolina or Oregon or even Ontario, Canada—a school superintendent or the leaders of an already-mobilized multi-sector coalition has learned of The Basics and contacted Boston about bringing The Basics to their community.

In Boston, however, there had been no invitation and there was less of a waiting constituency. Furthermore, neither Ferguson, nor Howard, nor Knox had worked before with the city's early childhood community, especially those who interacted directly with families.

Jeff Howard took the lead on setting up a meeting to engage about twenty senior members from the early childhood community to brief them, solicit feedback, invite participation, and get their blessings to move ahead.

Over the course of three convenings, most offered encouragement along with their endorsement of the initiative. Two years later, others have become increasingly supportive as relationships have been built.

The Boston Basics is a story about capacity building, but not just of technical knowledge or personnel or materials. It is a story about building relationships, trust, and earned authority in a local context already thick with early childhood resources, but where 40 percent of children still arrive on the first day of kindergarten underprepared.

Getting Started and Early Lessons

In 2015, the BPF funded WGBH to collaborate with the AGI on a set of core videos to communicate Basics concepts. The six videos that resulted (later replicated in Spanish and Haitian Creole) became the foundation for the pilot version of a Basics toolkit, which also included booklets for parents of infants and toddlers, posters for each of the Basics, and a three-session workshop series (that incorporated the videos).

The goal was to launch the campaign in Boston and, after a few years, spread it to other cities using lessons learned in Boston, if the Boston experience turned out to be successful.

During 2016, Jeff Howard of the BPF and Ron Ferguson of the AGI trained over 120 staff from over 20 organizations around the city, including community centers, health centers, early education and care providers, and family engagement organizations. These led to additional trainings and presentations by partner organizations—for example, sermons at some large churches, play groups at libraries, and parental engagement using Basics resources during group prenatal care at a major hospital.

Even as the Boston campaign was beginning in 2016, however, leaders from other communities became aware of it and asked to join in, to learn together.

Responding to a request from Chattanooga, Tennessee, the Boston team held a one-day convening at Boston Children's Museum in December of 2016 to introduce the approach to representatives from 11 cities that had expressed interest. Two of the communities profiled in this report, Chattanooga and Pickens County, South Carolina, were represented at that convening and became among the first outside of Boston to start their own local efforts.

From 2015 through the first half of 2017, the effort to reach and engage stakeholders remained almost entirely volunteer-based and there were different points of view within the leadership team regarding how much dedicated staff time would be needed to build and sustain the campaign.

For example, there were different assumptions regarding how much allies around the city could be counted on to "self-organize" and institutionalize The Basics inside their organizations and neighborhoods without at least occasional follow-up and support from a paid Boston Basics staff.

There were reasons for optimism, since trainings for staffers of partner organizations for the first year and a half went smoothly. Exit evaluations of the training sessions were favorable and participants expressed intentions to integrate The Basics into their communication with parents and caregivers.

Still, it became clear that building capacity to provide more support and coaching, especially through the early phase of implementation, would be beneficial for sustaining engagement. Organizations were not always sure what to do.

Especially when neighborhood-based organizations tried to deliver the first generation of workshops that the AGI and BPF had designed, there were challenges:

Partner Capacity. Some organizations that committed to deliver Boston Basics workshops in neighborhoods around the city found that their staff could not deliver the workshops as designed. There were several reasons. For one, the workshops were designed for adults as the audience, but the adults often brought their children. This meant that a host organization might need to plan for childcare—a potentially prohibitive cost. In addition, the workshops were designed to include PowerPoint presentations, but computers, screens, and projectors were not always available in community-based settings. Even when they were, the person that the organization assigned to do the presentation might lack the required skills.

Workshop Design. Some partners reported that the workshops had too much content and needed to be more interactive and hands-on to maximize learning. In addition, partners kept running out of the printed booklets and the process of refilling orders was cumbersome.

Limited BPF and AGI Capacity to Follow-up. One of the biggest challenges was limited capacity to conduct regular check-ins to track whether partner organizations were keeping their commitments. There also needed to be more follow through with technical assistance and support for some of the organizations that were making an effort.

Confronting these challenges led to several important new developments, described below.

Responding to Early Lessons

By early 2017, The Basics team re-calibrated its expectations about the staffing required to help a critical mass of organizations integrate The Basics into their work with families. There were also lessons drawn about the mix of implementation guides and materials that could be useful to organizations that were willing to do the work on their own, without much special assistance, but still not entirely sure how to proceed.

Forming The Basics, Inc. In 2017, the BPF formed a non-profit, The Basics, Inc., to manage implementation efforts and collaborate with the AGI, which would continue to develop new tools and resources for Boston and a growing list of other communities.

The Basics, Inc. then hired an Executive Director and a Program Director, as well as two part-time consultants to focus on marketing, communications, and fundraising.

Three Strategic Prongs. The Basics, Inc. undertook a strategic planning process to narrow and focus Boston's scope for the next phase of work. This generated a three-pronged approach to implementation, with short-term priorities in each area:

- i) **Sectoral:** The sectoral approach entails working through sector-based networks and structures, with an initial focus on the healthcare sector.

Healthcare was chosen for several reasons: it has a near universal reach, with frequent touchpoints for infants and toddlers spanning from prenatal through age three; healthcare providers are well trusted by families; and healthcare providers' motives align with The Basics, particularly as addressing social determinants of health becomes an increasing focus in the field.

In addition, a regional healthcare intermediary, The Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, works with all of the area health centers and its leaders offered to help.



- ii) **Place-Based:** The team decided to focus on two neighborhoods as proving grounds for the vision of “socio-ecological saturation,” selecting the communities of East Boston and Mattapan.

Both neighborhoods have well-established grassroots leadership that can help mobilize broad-based engagement. They are also areas where The Basics, Inc.’s program director has strong relationships, built over more than two decades of service in various roles.

- iii) **Broad Awareness:** The final prong involves using communications and marketing strategies to amplify the other two prongs, with an emphasis on the priority sectors and neighborhoods.



The Basics Community Toolkit. A grant in 2017 from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation of Chicago enabled creation of the second major phase of resources, dubbed the [Basics Community Toolkit](#).

The toolkit is an online repository of multimedia resources to help with Basics implementation work in Boston as well as other BLN communities. The design phase involved multiple rounds of soliciting partner input, including from other BLN localities, through surveys and in-person and phone interviews.

Launched in March of 2018, materials are modular and can be combined in different ways depending on the user's setting and workflow. Revised workshops are simpler and more interactive than those that some partners struggled to use in 2016. For example, none requires a PowerPoint file.

There are also hands-on activities aligned with each Basic, including some that engage parents and children together, designed specifically for parenting workshops where children are present. In addition, staffers in partner organizations can download printed instructional handouts for parents, with no need to re-order booklets.

“Street Cred”

A key inflection point in Boston came with the addition of the first Program Director, Haji Shearer, who leads outreach, training, and technical assistance to Boston's partner organizations. Prior to Shearer's arrival, these same functions had been handled by the AGI and BPF without a team member who was well-known among front-line service providers.

Shearer is a long-established social worker in Boston who most recently managed fatherhood programs for a state-level agency. With a twenty-five-year track record in Boston's family support sector, he has an extensive professional network and has worked at several current Boston Basics partner organizations.

Shearer is energetic, empathetic, strategic, charismatic, and held in high regard by colleagues. His presence has very clearly enhanced capacity to engage and support frontline staffers in partner organizations.

While Shearer's influence is rooted in his personal skills and professional history, it is also something that he actively cultivates.

For example, by periodically attending and lending a hand with non-Basics related events in key partner organizations, he strives to ensure that partnerships are reciprocal. Also, while his main role is “wholesale,” in other words, training staffers and preparing organizations to teach and support parents to use The Basics, he sometimes goes “retail,” offering workshops directly to parents as a way of modeling for staffers.

He says that by engaging directly with parents, he demonstrates that he is not asking partners to do things that he would not—or could not—do himself. Modeling is also an effective way to teach.

Building strong, mutually supportive, grassroots relationships is critical because The Basics, Inc. has no formal authority. Success depends on partners' voluntary participation. As more partners become trained, the more models there are for helping train others across the city.

Formalizing Structures and Processes

As The Basics, Inc. continues building capacity, including by hiring additional staff, the team is formalizing its work in the following ways:

Implementation Guidance. The new Basics Community Toolkit contains documents with guidance for partners, including an implementation planning and documentation guide, as well as a rubric that clearly defines four levels of implementation maturity (from Pre-Implementation to Mature Implementation) at the organization level.

The rubric serves as both a planning and evaluation tool. It is open-ended enough to accommodate diverse organizations, but clear regarding forms and levels of Basics institutionalization. It has helped communicate a clearer understanding among active partner organizations regarding what constitutes “mature” implementation at the organization level.

Partnership Agreements. Another recent step has been the development of a Scope of Work (SOW) form.

The Basics, Inc. designed the form for a project funded by the Boston Children’s Hospital (BCH) to help The Basics, Inc. train staff at healthcare and childcare centers.

The SOW spells out commitments on issues such as materials to be provided, the number and frequency of training sessions and technical assistance offered, and data collection. Having parties agree to and sign the SOW agreement increases clarity and promotes accountability.

Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. The team recently finalized the first version of a monitoring and evaluation plan, with performance indicators matched to a set of monitoring and survey tools. The tools are core elements of monitoring and evaluation activities beginning now, in the fall of 2018.

Still to be designed is a system for measuring community-level impacts on child outcomes, especially during the first three years of life, when standard developmental assessments are seldom if ever administered to whole communities.

Marketing and Communications. Finally, the Boston Basics campaign has used a quarterly newsletter, social media, billboards, and public relations (resulting in a number of newspaper articles) to reach the community with information about The Basics. Production support for these has come from the current staff as well as from consultants.

Still, developing a high quality, consistent approach to marketing and communication remains an ongoing need, to be addressed as additional resources become available.



Leaders of the East Boston Social Center are helping spearhead the socioecological saturation of that community. The Basics, Inc. recently presented them with a mock-up of a Boston Basics billboard to thank them.

Community-Level Systems

A key strategy of The Basics is to leverage existing community structures and processes. In Boston, this is starting to happen in several ways.

First, Boston Basics has been endorsed by several coalitions. At the city level, this includes the Boston Opportunity Agenda, Boston's cradle-to-career collective impact initiative, which has promoted Boston Basics as a citywide approach to supporting young children. Neighborhood-level coalitions, such as the East Boston Family Engagement Network, have also played a critical role in endorsing The Basics and engaging local early education and family support professionals.

Second, other organizations have started to integrate the Boston Basics into funding proposals. For example, in response to a recent request for proposals (RFP) from the Boston Foundation, a number of proposals featured prospective collaborations involving the Boston Basics.

Third, The Basics, Inc. is receiving inquiries from other state- and city-level initiatives that are interested in including the Boston Basics in their plans.

Finally, Jocelyn Friedlander, of the AGI is moving out of Harvard, into The Basics, Inc., as The Basics, Inc. consolidates to become the more mature backbone organization that the Boston Basics and BLN require. Friedlander has been the lead architect of the Basics Community Toolkit and will be the Director of Learning and Innovation.

Pickens County, South Carolina

In 1999, the state of South Carolina signed into law a new public-private partnership, [First Steps](#), to promote school readiness among the state's children. First Steps offers services that: enhance the health and wellbeing of young children (prenatal through age five); support parents in their role as caregivers; provide access to early intervention; help parents access quality child care; promote quality preschool options; and smooth the transition to kindergarten.



Across the state, county chapters of First Steps are charged with responding to local needs.

Two of these chapters, [Greenville County First Steps](#) and [Pickens County First Steps](#), collaborated on bringing The Basics to South Carolina. Each serves as the backbone organization for The Basics in its own county, although the two have consolidated some functions to serve both counties simultaneously. In this report, we focus on Pickens County because of the impressive progress they have made in a short time.

Backstory

In 2016, a South Carolina state-level consortium of early childhood agencies and professional groups released the report [Profile of the Ready Kindergartener](#). It defined kindergarten readiness in five developmental and academic domains:

- iv) Emotional and Social Development;
- v) Language and Literacy Development;
- vi) Mathematical Thinking;
- vii) Physical Development, Self-Help and Motor Skills; and
- viii) Approaches to Learning and Inquiry.

While it was a valuable consensus document for the early childhood field, some leaders believed it was too complex and jargon-filled to present to families.

This caused a group of early childhood leaders to start thinking about how to provide families with simple, accessible resources to help prepare their children for school.

The group began meeting during the summer of 2016, reviewing developmental domains and benchmarks in early childhood documents such as the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework*. This resulted in a long list of candidate topics to share with families.

Amity Buckner, Executive Director of Pickens County First Steps and a member of that group, said “We were culling down from a large list that at one point had 120 things on it.”

In the midst of this process, some members of the group heard about the Boston Basics through a mutual colleague. They reviewed Basics materials, including the core videos on the Boston Basics website.

Buckner remembers thinking, “That’s exactly what we’re trying to do... We don’t need to look any further!”

The Basics addressed the major domains of early development, worded in ways that would resonate with families. Moreover, Boston had already embedded them in videos and written materials.

Following preliminary conversations with Ron Ferguson at the AGI, Buckner and her colleague Beth Jamieson, Strategic Operations Director of Greenville County First Steps, attended the December 2016 Basics multi-city convening in Boston.

The convening solidified their interest in bringing the approach to South Carolina. A month later, Buckner and Jamieson co-presented on The Basics to the stakeholder group that had been working on messaging for families, and there was collective agreement to move forward with The Basics.

Getting Organized

The Pickens and Greenville teams began a joint effort to lay the groundwork for The Basics in their counties. Each organization would serve as the backbone responsible for leading and coordinating on-the-ground work in its own county, but they would collaborate as thought partners and work toward aligned messaging under the banner of “[Palmetto Basics](#)”—South Carolina is known as the “Palmetto State”—an umbrella that could support expansion to additional counties over time. Palmetto Basics has a unified online presence, with one website and associated social media channels.

Palmetto Basics currently does not have a formal governance structure. Rather, there is an informal relationship between Buckner and Jamieson, who check in with each other about once a month, bringing in Derek Lewis, Executive Director of Greenville County First Steps, when needed.

There were initial challenges with this arrangement, particularly around managing a unified brand presence.

Buckner says, “We’ve definitely had some hiccups with two county partners trying to do the same thing. We did have to figure out how...to do messaging, and that’s how we came to the delineation about how we share things [online]. That was a challenge at the beginning.”

Working together, the communications managers for each initiative developed a system for deciding what to post on their county-specific First Steps Facebook pages, and what to post on the Palmetto Basics page.

Pickens’ communications manager takes care of the websites and social media for both communities.

Like the other communities in this report, Pickens County realized it needed more staffing for The Basics, and hired someone to support outreach efforts. The person is compensated for five hours a week, though Buckner estimates that they regularly devote more time than that.

Engaging Champions

In May 2017, Ron Ferguson joined leaders from both counties in South Carolina for Palmetto Basics campaign kickoff events, one in Greenville and the other in Pickens. Since then, the teams have been learning how to spread The Basics in their distinct contexts—Greenville is the largest county in the state and more urban; Pickens is much smaller and rural.

The rest of this section will focus primarily on Pickens.

The kickoff included a Thursday evening roundtable discussion with local stakeholders, as well as a Friday breakfast with civic leaders in Greenville and a luncheon with Pickens County First Steps affiliates and local partners.

The events helped influential partners move toward a shared vision for how The Basics could play out in their communities and helped Palmetto Basics increase its mailing list and social media following.

Already a Backbone

Pickens County First Steps was in the advantageous position of already playing a backbone role for the local early childhood community, with attendant social networks and sway with key influencers. This positioning in the local system paved the way for initial outreach.

“Our primary goal after we launched, through June 2018, was to get all organizations that serve Pickens County families with children from birth to age five on board,” Buckner said.

This, Buckner says, is well on its way to being achieved.

Since the launch, the number of *Palmetto Basics Champions* has grown steadily. Leaders of organizations are invited to sign a *Champion Pledge* to formalize and document their commitment to The Basics (Buckner says that “Memorandum of Understanding” was deemed too formal-sounding).

Once the pledge is signed, the organization receives its own copy along with an “I’m a Palmetto Basics Champion” certificate for public display. Organizations also receive the password for the *Resources* page on the Palmetto Basics website, which gives them access to branded materials and resources for sharing The Basics with families.

The pledge includes additional stipulations regarding issues such as adherence to Palmetto Basics messaging, promotional use of Basics logos, and data sharing. By June 2018, Palmetto Basics had recruited around 300 Champions, 90 of which represented organizations in Pickens County and the rest in Greenville.

To help the Champions in Pickens County learn about The Basics and keep their spirits high, Pickens County First Steps convenes them quarterly at Palmetto Basics “Champions for Children” gatherings.

Buckner says that these sessions have an energizing, “rally the troops” feel. Most have a theme, intended to support the work of Champions in sharing The Basics; the theme is addressed through a capacity-building presentation or training followed by Q&A.

The convenings are also used to facilitate brainstorming about what additional resources might be helpful, to replenish partners’ supplies of materials such as flyers, and to interview Champions on video for social media posts.

Sometimes participants design fun artifacts to help get the word out about The Basics.

For example, at one convening, attendees painted the five Basics onto rocks that they placed around the county.

When The Basics began in Pickens County there was a stand-alone time for the convenings. More recently, the locals have repurposed the quarterly meeting of the Children’s Services Council of Pickens County to focus on The Basics. The alliance is a coalition of over 35 agencies that meets to enhance alignment, integration, and information sharing among organizations that serve children from birth to age five in the county. There are two action teams and a leadership team that each meet monthly.

The fact that the suggestion to repurpose their quarterly meeting came from Council members, not from her, was important to Buckner.

She says, “I didn’t want The Basics to be seen as a First Steps effort—this is a community effort.”

The fact that the Council with its 35 member organizations decided to give its quarterly meeting time over to The Basics shows that others too regard it as a community effort.

Moving Beyond the Usual Suspects

In Pickens County, 74 percent of children do not meet kindergarten readiness benchmarks. The school with the least kindergarten readiness is in a very rural area of the county.

Buckner says it has “two convenience stores and six or seven churches. When you look at your community resources, and when the faith-based community is what you have, you go with it. We live in the Bible Belt...The faith community is an important part of daily life.”

She reports that some faith leaders have been attending the quarterly convenings since the beginning, but without seeing themselves as leaders in The Basics movement.

That has started to change. At the end of a recent convening, a pastor approached Buckner to say, “I think I finally understand!”

He told her about church history and the origins of Sunday school as a means to help families educate their children.

That minister has since taken a public stance as an advocate for The Basics. He has helped frame The Basics in a way that is resonating with other church leaders.

“I couldn’t have given him that passion,” Buckner said. “I think that’s why his message is so compelling, because he got there on his own. And others are coming along, saying, ‘yeah, yeah, this is our role.’”

It took authentic commitment and activation of social capital from within the faith community itself to inspire others.

Looking Ahead

Deepening and expanding the work with faith-based groups is an intentional part of Buckner’s strategy for the coming year.

First Steps recently hosted a gathering for faith leaders where representatives from 15 churches attended and all signed up to be Basics Champions.

They are working on recruiting additional churches to join the movement.

First Steps has also made inroads with the local medical sector. The county's only birthing hospital, as well as two private pediatricians, have signed on as Champions.

In the hospital, each labor and delivery room has a Basics poster. The labor and delivery nurses were given Basics materials that they use as talking points when they discharge families. They also give each family a book with a Basics sticker.

Buckner reports, "I can say with 98 percent confidence that [families] are seeing something related to The Basics before they leave that hospital with a baby."

Moving forward, Buckner hopes to see more progress with the school district, where early childhood has not seemed to be a priority. An encouraging sign is that the 14 elementary schools in the district have all signed on as Basics Champions.

The work of spreading The Basics feels slower and more labor-intensive than anticipated.

"I think that we probably naively thought that we would have more saturation at this point than we do—that we would have more people who had caught the vision," Buckner explained.

But the investments of time and energy are starting to pay off as evidenced by the expanding roster of Champions and, more importantly, the deepening of active engagement by churches and schools.



Chattanooga, Tennessee

On June 16, 2016, Stephen Culp wrote Ron Ferguson an email that began as follows: “We met last week, and sat at the same table, at your presentation of the Boston Basics to the HBS [Harvard Business School] Young American Leaders Program (YALP) group.”

YALP is an initiative where Harvard Business School brings teams of highly accomplished young leaders to work on their leadership skills and expand their professional networks. Each participating city sends a team of about 10 people to the program, where each team must design a project that benefits their home community.

“Your presentation changed the course of our cohort's plans,” Culp wrote.

“Chattanooga's YALP group has decided to go after early childhood education as our focus ... Thank you for opening our eyes to the importance of this issue. Your presentation had a deep, immediate, and catalytic influence on our group, and we look forward to helping grow that influence to others in our area.”

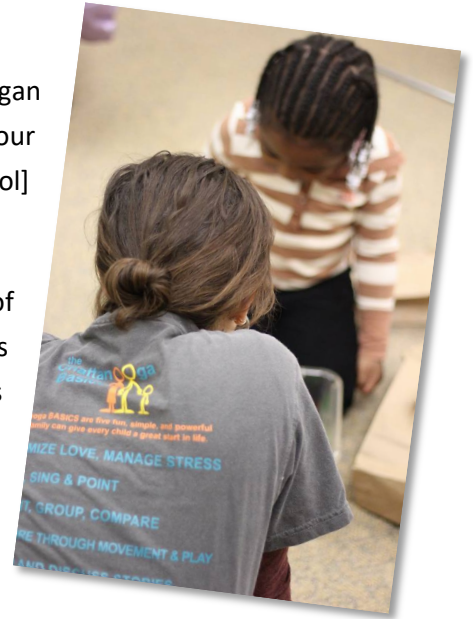
Jared Bigham was a member of the Chattanooga YALP group and also the Executive Director of an organization named [Chattanooga 2.0](https://chatt2.org/) (Chatt2.0), where The Basics campaign is now a component.

Chatt 2.0 is a civic movement to transform education and workforce opportunities in Hamilton County, where Chattanooga is the largest municipality.

The goal is to build “the smartest community in the South.” This focus on intellectual development represents a shift in civic priorities. In the past, the economic development emphasis was on physical appearances and infrastructure.

Today, Chatt 2.0 states that, “Our work revolves around people and making sure we support our local talent in taking full advantage of the workforce opportunities that are available.”⁴

They want to double the percentage of youth who obtain a post-secondary degree or credential from 30 percent to over 60 percent by 2025. They also want to increase the percentage of adults



⁴ <https://chatt2.org/>

who have a college degree or technical training certificate from 38 percent to 75 percent over the same period.

However, they also understand that early brain development gives infants and toddlers the best chance of avoiding adult poverty and achieving lofty outcomes as they get older.

This is why Chatt 2.0 stakeholders were receptive when the YALP team returned to Chattanooga and introduced the Boston Basics.

In August of 2016, only two months after meeting at HBS, the YALP team had Ron Ferguson visit Chattanooga to meet with public and private sector leaders.

By explaining the main ideas, showing the core videos, and sharing other resources, Ferguson amplified what the YALP team had described.

Assembling the Team

There was already an early childhood action team within Chatt 2.0. It was called “Early Matters Chattanooga” and had more than 30 organizations registered as members. The [Chattanooga Basics](#) became a flagship component of the Early Matters portfolio, which also includes a working group on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES).

Robin Cayce, the Chatt 2.0 Director of Programs, says, “We feel like ACEs and Basics meld so well together.” The ACES working group focuses on training educators to recognize trauma and apply trauma-informed practices in their classrooms.

Soon after The Basics was introduced as an Early Matters initiative, it became clear that the YALP group—composed of busy young professionals—could not devote enough time to lead The Basics campaign.

While several belonged to the initial iteration of the Early Matters Coalition, they soon transferred responsibility for the Chattanooga Basics to an Early Matters working group of 15 people who Cayce says, “were particularly passionate about The Basics.”

For a year and a half, this working group conducted outreach around the city, speaking with leaders of organizations, doing presentations, and helping organizations integrate The Basics into their activities.

Ultimately, however, they concluded that the outreach they were doing needed to be supplemented by a paid staff.

Building Staff Capacity

By the spring of 2018, Early Matters secured funding for two Chattanooga Basics staff positions to augment the efforts of the volunteer working group.

Now on the job, one of the Chattanooga Basics staffers, Caroline Shepard, works part-time and focuses on marketing and communications, while the other, Silvia Ramos, is the full-time Program Director who develops strategy and handles trainings and support for local organizations. She meets weekly with Robin Cayce, who also facilitates the working group, which still meets.

By the time Silvia arrived on the job in 2018, the working group had achieved a lot of buy-in from local leaders and organizations, which gave her a foundation to build on and solidify.

For example, they had developed a program through volunteers at the local hospital who learned to introduce The Basics to new mothers before they left the hospital with a newborn.

Silvia says, “Most every community I’ve gone to has at least a fundamental understanding of The Basics. That’s where I see the strength of this particular working group. They’ve spent the past two years doing outreach and building awareness. So I can build on that momentum. I’ll go into an organization and the head may not know about it, but a staffer does. So it’s not a concept that’s foreign to them. That’s really valuable.”

She believes the work group still has a role to play in outreach and in sustaining the momentum of the Chattanooga Basics.

However, there is no doubt that a shift is taking place.

She says, “I am creating my own relationships with stakeholders inside of that socio-ecological model in the community, and some of those people may not be part of the coalition that already exists. I will make decisions based on my knowledge, but I am always going to be flexible about incorporating feedback or finding a role for your organization as we move forward. I try to communicate as much as possible with the stakeholder group.”

Engaging Gatekeepers

Silvia’s job is to help organizations incorporate The Basics into their work with families at the same time she promotes the idea that the whole community has a responsibility to make sure children experience The Basics.

She says, “The more we can empower and equip different stakeholders in each of the communities to support and reinforce The Basics, the greater likelihood of all our children being successful.”

What does this really mean?

For one, she says it means “understanding who the gatekeepers are in the places where people go for healthcare, child care, faith services.”

Getting to know the gatekeepers is a priority if one is going to be effective in a community. Doing so is important enough to trade-off against other activities that compete for scarce time, because of the multiplier effects of obtaining the gatekeepers’ cooperation.

She continued, “I’ve been engaging with particular leaders in the faith-based community, helping them think about how we can engage families.”

Silvia asks the faith leaders as well as other community-based allies to help Chatt 2.0 shape the long-term Chattanooga Basics strategy.

“We don’t just want to go into communities and say, ‘Here, we have a tool that we think will make a difference here.’ We want to engage them in the process so they have ownership of the approach. They state the needs, and also share the assets in the community that will be critical to our success.”

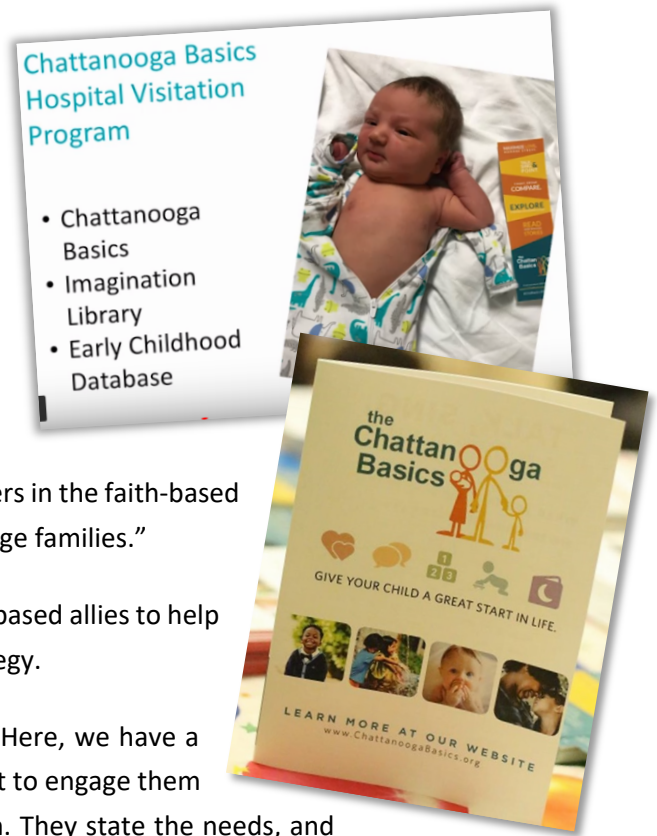
For example, one of the Chatt 2.0 coalition members happens to be an elected official who has a leadership position at a church in a high-need part of town, where there is limited access to high quality early childcare.

Silvia approached this leader to talk about spreading The Basics. The leader shared how her church has incorporated The Basics into sermons as well as the children’s ministry.

Silvia connected the church leader with the Head Start director for the city, since there is a Head Start location in same community (Avondale).

The leader of the local Head Start location then proposed that Silvia should “come in and train our staff so they can integrate it into their classrooms, as well as our families.”

In the same neighborhood, an elementary school wants Basics training for the parent-teacher association (PTA), pre-k parents and kindergarten parents. Silvia also plans to approach a nearby medical clinic.



By being responsive, Silvia is earning the community's trust in a slowly unfolding process of transforming the campaign into a movement.

Even before Silvia started, she knew she would have to earn the influence, or one might say the authority, to provide the guidance she is offering to community partners.

She says she thinks long-term sustainability requires posing the question, "How do I teach you this in such a way that you know how to incorporate it and don't depend on me? Teaching for empowerment, not for transactional sharing."

The challenge is that she cannot walk into a neighborhood and ask for quality implementation when all she has to offer is an idea.

"You have to roll up your sleeves. The history of my work is that if people see you are willing to work with them, and that you wouldn't ask them to do anything you wouldn't do yourself, it builds trust."

In her conversations with Head Start centers, she always starts by saying that The Basics offers a variety of tools "that can meet your organization where you are." They might say they are interested in learning about The Basics, but not ready to implement. Others are ready to designate an internal leader and take on the work by participating in focus groups and follow-up conversations.

In one recent case, they had a "what about this, and what about that" conversation, then arrived at the idea that they wanted to train their staff and create something with The Basics that would be exciting for families.

Regarding other challenges, Silvia says, "I'm a systems thinker and so there's a plus and a drawback in that. Part of what has been a plus for me is that, again, this effort until recently has been a volunteer-led effort that has created so much awareness and has gotten a lot of visibility. That has been helpful in that I don't feel like I have to start from square one. And my approach to The Basics is that this is a tool we can use to change the system of early childhood.

"The drawback is that it has been difficult to track implementation. That led us to ask, 'How do we create an implementation survey to track what people have done with The Basics?'"

She was pleased to learn that The Basics, Inc. has now created such a tool.

Yonkers, New York

Superintendent Dr. Edwin Quezada of the Yonkers Public Schools heard about The Basics from Superintendent Dr. Raymond Sanchez, of Ossining, a neighboring school district.

In a January 6, 2017 email he wrote, “Dr. Ferguson—I am extremely interested in implementing Basics in the City of Yonkers. I spoke to our Mayor and he is also interested. I also spoke to Yonkers Thrives—an organization working on cradle to career initiatives. They are also interested. Please let me know when we can connect.”



It had always troubled Quezada that so many students arrived for preschool or kindergarten socially, emotionally, or academically unprepared and he had felt helpless to do anything about it.

Now, he could do something. In addition, milestone #1 of [My Brother's Keeper](#) (MBK), the nationwide movement that President Obama initiated from the White House, is that young children should arrive at school ready to learn. The Basics was the right thing to do and, coincidentally, it could fill the early-childhood slot in the Yonkers MBK strategy.

Quezada asked his deputy superintendent, Dr. Andrea Coddett, to bring The Basics campaign, including all of the tools that Boston was using to spread The Basics, to Yonkers. It was a role that she welcomed.

It was her 26th year in education, 16th in school administration, and first in the Yonkers public schools.

“I had done two previous stints in early childhood and have a soft spot for early childhood,” she says. “I know how important the foundation is.” The Basics campaign was “an opportunity to develop a movement and have input in shaping student growth and development.”

So, she set about contacting the people that she needed as allies for moving forward.

The School System is Calling

Yonkers is one of eight school systems in the lower Hudson River valley that have brought The Basics campaign into their communities.

Coddett believes school systems have a special advantage in securing the cooperation of other sectors for a campaign like The Basics, because child development is the school system's normal responsibility. She thinks that leaders in healthcare, faith-based organizations, and other sectors see it as only natural that the school system should bring The Basics to Yonkers and seek allies.

Families, too, see The Basics as a natural fit for the school system.

Coddett says, "When you introduce The Basics through a school system, you reach out to families with young children and give them a sense that this is a way to ensure that their children are ready to learn when they get to school."

The Advisory Board

The [Yonkers Basics](#) has what Coddett describes as a "wonderful advisory board" representing community organizations from multiple sectors: school-based personnel, city personnel, parks and recreation, early childhood, parent-teacher associations, healthcare, faith-based, civic organizations, and libraries. Most members have full-time jobs, so the time they devote to The Basics is volunteer time.

Coddett says, "Pretty much everybody on the advisory board has followed up in some way with their organization and we have loosely monitored it. Now, however, we are moving into a different phase of implementation, where we are asking people to commit to very specific actions.

"For example, if you commit to present a workshop, we have the sign-up information and our liaison will follow up to collect that information. As more and more people commit to sharing The Basics, there is more work for the liaison."

Sophia Wu, the person currently in the liaison role, was hired in March of 2018. A community grant provides funds for 10-20 hours per week. However, there is a lot to do, and Wu tends to do whatever needs to be done, so some of the time she devotes amounts to volunteering.

The Yonkers Kickoff

The community kickoff celebration for the Yonkers Basics took place on May 10, 2017.

Deputy Superintendent Coddett and a committee of helpers had sent out invitations for a few hundred people and Ron Ferguson came from Harvard to participate for the full day.

Coddett recalls, "There was the plenary introduction in the morning with about 200 people, and then small groups in the afternoon which is where many of the advisory board members were recruited.

“We had two New York State Regents, two neighboring superintendents, one who had launched [a local Basics campaign] and another who was thinking about launching The Basics, and the Yonkers mayor and several other dignitaries from the public and private sectors. A large group of parents came from an adult education school. They were predominantly Spanish speaking, so we ensured that we had translators to communicate the gist of the message.”

It was important to have all those stakeholders in the room, she says, to hear about plans for The Basics “and to engage them to see how they wanted to support us.”

After the Kickoff

The initial plan following the kickoff was for the advisory group to meet monthly. But the group decided to meet almost weekly once they set their sights on promoting awareness of The Basics at Yonkers’ River Fest in September.

River Fest is a major annual celebration on the banks of the Hudson River to welcome the coming of autumn. It attracts vendors and musicians, and has activities for families of all backgrounds and children of all ages.

The Basics advisory board decided to get a booth, hand out information, and talk to families. They got a permit for the booth and created promotional material.

Frequent meetings from June through August focused mostly on the September event—not long-term planning. River Fest was judged to be a successful introduction of The Basics to the wider Yonkers community, partly because it generated a contact list of parents and caregivers to be engaged later.

The South Broadway Business District

The South Broadway corridor is a high-poverty section of Yonkers that sends a lot of children to Yonkers Public Schools. It is also where Dr. Rosemary Uzzo, perhaps the most active member of The Basics advisory board and a longtime Yonkers resident and educator, is the mayor’s liaison to the board of the South Broadway Business Improvement District (BID).

Uzzo and Coddett agreed that the South Broadway BID should be a partner in promoting The Basics. After all, Coddett says, “Families need laundromats and places to shop, but they also need information on how to promote their children’s wellbeing.”

In order to quickly raise awareness in the South Broadway area, Uzzo collaborated with Karel Littman, the Executive Director of the South Broadway BID, to recruit a local artist to turn the parking lot wall of the A&S Gourmet Deli into a mural of the five Basics.

Once the mural was done, the artist painted boxes in the same style, to be placed in South Broadway businesses, to hold books that local families could take home.

The books were collected in a book drive organized by a Basics volunteer.



Soon, Uzzo was working with the advisory board and the South Broadway BID to present Basics trainings at several South Broadway locations.

Aware that the county legislator for the area had received a grant to do a “Mommy and Me” program for Spanish-speaking caregivers of young children, Uzzo invited the legislator to work with The Basics.

The legislator accepted by contributing the “Mommy and Me” funds she had raised to support Uzzo and others in providing Basics instruction for English- and Spanish-speaking parents and grandparents, many of whom had signed up at River Fest and lived in the South Broadway area.

Coddett says, “We have grandparents who are raising grandchildren who volunteer in the schools as readers—why not train them in The Basics? So we had trainings at restaurants and at the library.”

Jennifer Longley, an early-childhood education faculty member at a nearby community college, works on a volunteer basis as the lead trainer. Jennifer Coggio, the Director of Early Childhood Education for Yonkers, recruits Yonkers staff to provide workshops for early childhood teachers and parents, incorporating music and movement and mindfulness.

Becoming More Strategic

Moving forward, the Yonkers Basics advisory board has selected four priority sectors to approach with what they are calling “Ask Letters.”

The advisory board developed the letters, tailored to the specific sectors. Each letter lists up to a dozen ways that the recipient organization can help spread The Basics.

There will be a sub-committee for each sector to distribute and follow up on the letters to secure commitments from organizations in that sector.

The four sectors are: early childhood, healthcare (hospitals, with focus on prenatal and perinatal care), the business community (advertising, financial support), and the faith-based community. With the business community, the focus will be mostly on help with advertising.

For example, in nearby Ossining, super-markets have posted Basics conversation prompts.

Yonkers hopes movie theaters will play The Basics videos during previews. One of the advisory board members has a print shop. Another is an influential union member.

“We have to leverage the people that we have who have connections with the people we wish to reach, in order to saturate the community with Yonkers Basics,” Coddett says.

Preparing to Measure Impacts

To assess the ultimate impact of The Basics movement, the Yonkers school system is going to begin systematizing the collection and storage of data using a baseline measure of their incoming students on the Brigance assessment as four-year-olds.

The school system has conducted the assessment in the past, but without storing results in an easily retrievable form. Hard copies of results were kept in individual children’s folders, but no data were entered electronically for use at the school or district level.

This change in data management and analysis is a consequence of The Basics movement in Yonkers—a positive side effect. However, exactly how the data will get entered remains an open question. Nothing in the teachers’ contract requires them to enter it. Consequently, Coddett says, transferring data from paper forms into the computer will be a new expense to cover.

Even as the district prepares for measuring impacts, there is already research underway to understand and document the process in Yonkers. A professor from Fordham University is conducting an analysis of The Basics campaign there, framed by ideas from improvement science.

Moving Forward

Coddett reports that the advisory board remains engaged and productive after almost a year and a half. She says they like to combine learning at the meetings with working. For example, sometimes they have “work bursts” where they are assigned a challenge to address, divide into small groups with laptops, and then return to the large group with answers or recommendations.

Coddett says, “In a few years we might have it formalized,” but there is no hurry. “Right now, we’re learning by doing and trying to place structures around what we’re doing, or we’re trying to create structures through which we can operate. In two to three years we hope to see a more formalized approach to what we do. And hopefully in formalizing the approach, we don’t lose the personalization of it.”

One approach they plan to use more is to insert The Basics into the agendas of other organizations' scheduled meetings.

Coddett says, "Right now we have someone on our advisory board who already meets with heads of health clinics. So, we'll leverage an existing meeting that they have. In another example, Westchester Community Opportunity Programs is the lead organization for many child care sites and Head Start centers throughout Westchester County [in which Yonkers is located]. They meet monthly so we can use those groups to communicate information about The Basics."

In the schools, the plan is to give students, and especially those in the MBK clubs at the eight high schools, a menu of ways to support The Basics as part of their community service.

Already, one high school has worked with a group of MBK students to write and perform skits as a way of teaching The Basics to parents.

Coddett says, "In five years we want to see The Basics used in each of our identified sectors. We want to see social-emotional readiness and school readiness. We want to see every sector using the pillars of The Basics, and of course, we want to see that our kids are ready to learn. We want this to be a normal part of what we do."

"And," she says, "we are hoping that we have some sort of data to prove that our strategies are effective and impactful."



Themes Across the Four Communities

This report concerns how leadership coalitions in four localities initiated Basics campaigns to enhance parenting and care-giving for children ages birth to three.

In each case, an initial backbone coalition relied heavily on pre-existing social networks in which established influencers persuaded people in their social networks to dedicate time and resources.

These leaders set out to change local systems by changing communication norms across a range of institutions that parents and other caregivers already know and trust.

The themes that emerge fall in two major clusters. The first concerns what leadership coalitions did to organize and launch the campaigns. The second pertains to how they went about integrating The Basics into their communities.

In addition, there are two ongoing challenges. First, finding efficient, scalable approaches to measurement (e.g., monitoring implementation, tracking progress, determining impacts). And second, reaching larger numbers of volunteers and staffers in partner organizations with instruction on how to share The Basics with parents and other caregivers. Currently, The Basics, Inc. is working on methods for addressing both challenges by leveraging technology.

Getting Started

Tools from the Boston Basics. The ideas and tools that the AGI and BPF developed for the Boston Basics campaign gave the leadership coalition in each community some seminal resources for getting started. These included the English and Spanish versions of the six core videos, workshop materials, print collateral, and of course the foundational ideas of the campaign.

Introducing The Basics Concept to Local Stakeholders. The clearest theme across all four cases is that people began the work in their home communities by engaging members of their pre-existing social and professional networks.

They showed these associates the six core Basics videos and invited them to consider what a positive difference it might make if parents in every segment of their communities knew and used The Basics in nurturing their children.

Responses were almost universally receptive.

The backbone coalition varied from one place to another, but each organized a kickoff event that brought key influencers together not just to build awareness, but to plant seeds for a shared commitment to helping The Basics reach families at scale. Ferguson from Harvard and the Boston

Basics attended these events, made presentations, and met with key leaders. As The Basics, Inc. and the BLN develop, others will be in positions to play this role of helping communities launch. Even now, many BLN communities have launched The Basics without an outside visitor to assist.

A theme at each kickoff event was that even though the idea for The Basics campaign started with a focus on racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps, The Basics are universally important and represent ideas around which the whole community can unify, as demonstrated in Yonkers at River Fest.

Recognizing a Need to have Paid Staff. At some point in their first two years, each backbone coalition realized that there needed to be a few paid staff members dedicated specifically to The Basics.

The campaign would still count on volunteers, but there were tasks that needed to be performed with a degree of reliability: fundraising, marketing and communications, hosting events, helping leaders of organizations understand ways to integrate The Basics into their operations, training frontline staffers to share The Basics with parents, strategic planning, securing and monitoring commitments, tracking progress, and more.

Developing Sectoral Proof Points. In recognition of capacity constraints, the backbone coalition in each city has grown increasingly focused on achieving implementation exemplars or proof points in particular sectors, neighborhoods, and even organizations.

The bet is that initially more intensive engagement in a limited sphere can help Basics staff and volunteers learn what it takes to produce success in specific contexts. Later, the resulting skills and examples can be leveraged to spread that success.

Integrating The Basics into the Community

Integrating The Basics into a community means making use of The Basics with infants and toddlers a core feature of that community's socioecological system of organizations, relationships, and norms.

Achieving this takes time and learning, but each backbone group is staying focused.

Sending Trusted Envoys. Leaders in each city figured out how to have the person who reached out to any given segment of the community be someone who was trusted enough to inspire that part of the community to make a commitment and follow through with action.

This was achieved, for example, by enlisting people who were already well known and respected within the segment of the community being courted, and generally, finding ways to make relationships mutually beneficial.

Understanding Targeted Organizations. It was also important to reach out to the right people in a given organization: Should it be the Director of a particular department or the CEO? Should it be the minister or the superintendent of the Sunday school?

The answer in any particular case might depend on institutional knowledge of the organization and its individual personalities. Having an inclusive Basics coalition increased the likelihood that someone in the coalition knew the right answer regarding a targeted organization.

Getting Embedded in Larger Initiatives. The Chattanooga, Yonkers, and Pickens campaigns are each embedded inside larger enterprises. The Basics in Chattanooga is part of the birth-to-three segment of Chatt 2.0, the cradle-to-career collective impact movement. In Yonkers, it is the kindergarten-readiness component of the My Brother's Keeper initiative, and also an extension of the K-12 school system. In Pickens, The Basics campaign is hosted by a state-supported intermediary, First Steps, though its leadership took pains to emphasize it was "owned" by the entire community.

Even in Boston, there was a pre-existing organizational context (beyond the AGI at Harvard). In particular, The Basics provided the answer when the Black Philanthropy Fund was seeking a potentially high-impact way of supporting academic progress in Boston's black community and beyond.

Getting on the Agendas of Others' Meetings. It was typical for Basics campaign leaders to ask for time on the agendas of other organizations' meetings to talk about The Basics and recruit new allies. Some of these other organizations had more resources than The Basics campaign and were willing to share in order to support The Basics.

Formalizing Agreements. Over time, there has been an increased emphasis on formalizing commitments of people and organizations to play particular roles or follow through on agreements.

None of the campaigns began with a set way of addressing the issue, but all are moving in that direction.

Whether through memorandums of understanding or scope-of-work agreements or pledges or specific lists of commitments from which organizations can select (Yonkers' "Ask Letters"), the campaigns are becoming more systematic regard commitments and follow-through.

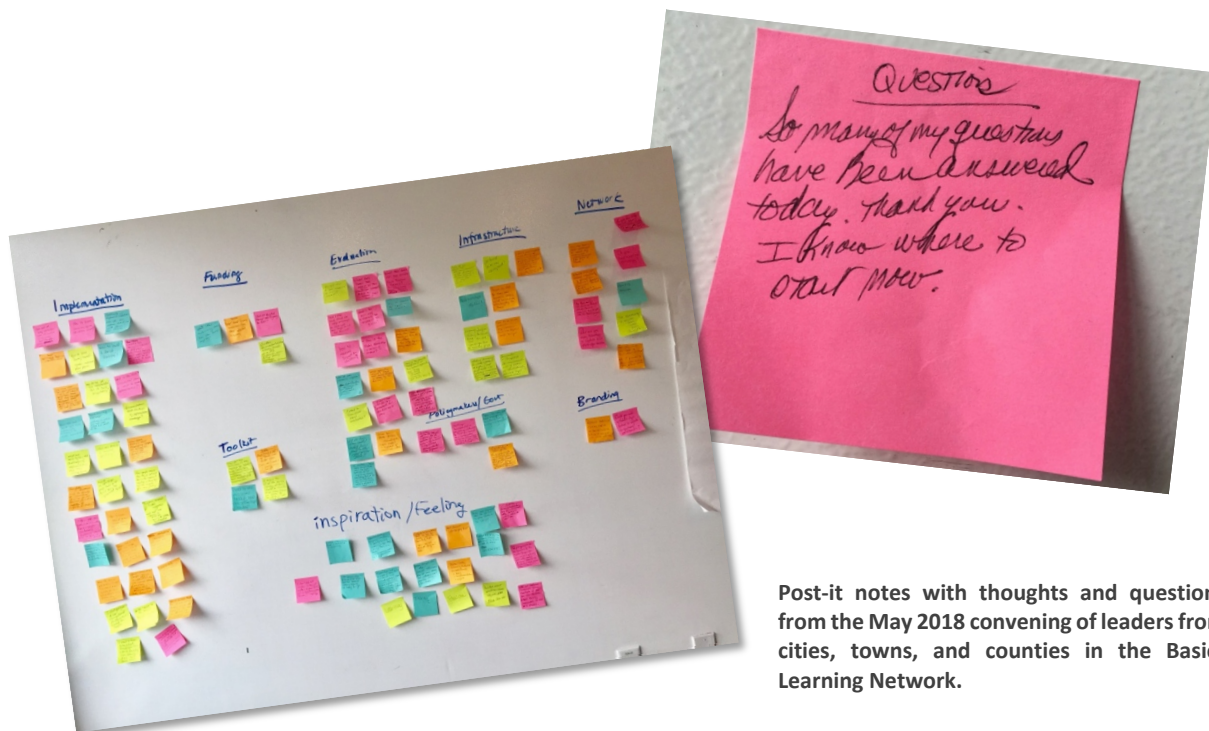
Incentives. A related issue concerns incentives. Specifically, what incentives do stakeholders have to follow through on commitments? For example, why would a home visitor follow through to discuss The Basics with a parent during a home visit?

In some cases, the answer is that sharing The Basics with families is part of the job and therefore something that supervisors monitor.

More often, however, the most important incentives are social: recognition, celebration, positive feedback from families, and frequent reminders about how closely The Basics align with one's own core values and purposes.

Active incentives should become less necessary in any given context, as stakeholders incorporate Basics-related behaviors into their standard routines.

Reaching Out through Advertising and Social Media. Communication issues have not been a focus of this report. However, each community has reached out locally using multiple forms of outreach. A future report will address this issue more extensively.



Post-it notes with thoughts and questions from the May 2018 convening of leaders from cities, towns, and counties in the Basics Learning Network.

Data for Tracking Impacts

A structural challenge for all four communities in this report, indeed for the entire BLN, is the absence of population-level indicators for children in the birth-to-three age range.

Fortunately, most communities assess kindergarten readiness at school entry, which provides a longer-term metric for tracking whether Basics campaigns ultimately move the community-level trend line on overall school readiness, compared to other communities where The Basics are implemented less intensively or not at all.

But kindergarten readiness measures are useless for knowing whether Basics campaigns are changing trajectories even by the age of two or three.

The problem is not an absence of metrics.

Well-established assessments and screening tools for infants and toddlers include the SWYC (Survey of Well-being of Young Children), which is used in pediatrics, and the ASQ (Ages and Stages Questionnaire), common in early care and education settings.

However, none are deployed community-wide and data entry and storage tend to be haphazard.

In one place, paper records might be kept in patients' folders. In another, medical practitioners visually scan completed questionnaires and then throw the forms away. In another place, the data are stored electronically, but not in a useful way.

One attempt to avoid this challenge is to conduct smaller studies inside organizations that routinely measure child outcomes, but even this has two downsides:

First, it takes additional capacity. Second, and more importantly, The Basics campaign is intended to be a community-level intervention. Studies inside individual organizations, while interesting, are mostly irrelevant for measuring community-level effects.

In the future, The Basics, Inc. and BLN partners can collaborate on addressing this challenge.

Delivering Training at Scale to Frontline Providers

Preparing frontline staffers in local organizations to deliver and reinforce The Basics with parents is an essential link in the chain for spreading The Basics.

Of course, frontline providers in local communities are already professionals at communicating with parents and other caregivers; they just need to add The Basics.

Training for The Basics campaign can add familiarity with the language of the five Basics, an understanding of why each of the five is important, and knowledge of the tools and resources that can help a professional share The Basics with families.

Training can include effective ways of weaving The Basics into routine conversations with parents and caregivers, at times when conversations are already part of a professional's job, such as during a pediatric well-baby visit.

The communities in this report have used a variety of methods for training staffers, but finding the most efficient and effective ways of doing so, and for building a sense of community among providers, is an ongoing focus of BLN learning.

Working with small groups is effective, but training individuals or very small groups of service providers can place heavy demands on a Basics staffer's time and makes it difficult to reach a whole community.

Conversely, larger gatherings are not only more efficient to plan and deliver, they also promote a sense of community, foster cross-fertilization, and strengthen the inter-organizational Basics network.

A problem with relying mainly on large sessions is the difficulty of finding times that large numbers of people can attend.

Another problem is that a person who attends a large training event as the sole representative from an organization may return to the organization as the sole enthusiast. Lack of a supportive cohort can impede integration of The Basics into the organization.

The Basics, Inc. has begun taking steps to develop an online or blended-learning system to address these issues and thereby support scale-up across the BLN.

Online trainings and certifications that professionals in all communities of the BLN can use, and models for supplementing online with in-person experiences, will greatly increase the capacity of the network to prepare front-line service providers to incorporate The Basics into their work.

With an online training and certification system in place, the staffers of a Basics campaign might convene larger workshops a few times a year to complement the online system, while checking in occasionally with organizations to exchange feedback and express appreciation for their continuing engagement.

Conclusion

This report tells how Basics campaigns in four cities have made progress under distinct local circumstances, while holding tight to the shared vision that all infants and toddlers should experience The Basics. All four cities are pursuing the same strategy of *socioecological saturation*, to share and reinforce The Basics routinely through community-level relationships that parents already trust, not a new stand-alone program.

Some of the learning, such as lessons about the division of labor between volunteer and paid staff, can be paid forward. The Basics, Inc. is capturing such insights in tools and resources that should make the startup period more predictable and efficient for new BLN communities.

However, some issues, such as the choice of which local sectors (beyond healthcare) to prioritize, will take on different forms from one time and place to another. Even for these topics, diagnostic tools can be developed as decision-making aids.

In ways tailored to their communities, staff and volunteers in Basics backbone coalitions are building capacity to institutionalize The Basics. They aim to achieve sustainable systems changes to ensure that supports for The Basics remain in place over the long term, placing newborns on higher lifetime developmental trajectories beginning from birth.

This is the first in a series of three reports commissioned by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to take stock of what communities around the U.S. are learning as they set out to implement local Basics campaigns.

The next two reports will present more detail on the structures and agreements communities are putting in place in pursuit of this goal.