# A Pathway to Well-Being for Children and Families: Progress, Plans and Potential

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# Dedication

**It all started with a vision,** a vision that all children in Vermont deserved a healthy start and meaningful relationships with caring adults. It was a vision that, given access to quality early childhood care, education, and health services, all children could learn and reach their full potential.

Beginning with Success by Six in 1992 to launching Building Bright Futures in 2006; from creating a state-wide Early Childhood Framework and Action Plan in 2013-14 to securing $36.9 million in federal money to support the state's early childhood system; Vermont has been and continues to be a national leader in the support of children and their families in the earliest years.  This is a state that understands that our children are our leaders of tomorrow.

Vermont also understands how to work together on behalf of our children. This year, we are proud to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Building Bright Futures.  We will continue the work with our public and private partners to strengthen and sustain a comprehensive early childhood system.

Our appreciation to Dr. Helene Clark, Mr. Eoin Collins, Dr. Dana Taplin, and the team at ActKnowledge for conducting the research, outlining the findings and framing the recommendations of this report. It will serve as critical guidance to this important work.

Our thanks to the many champions of Building Bright Futures during the last decade and all of those who have committed their time, talent and hearts to "harnessing the power of Vermont's communities to improve the lives of our children and families."

Sincerely,

*Mary Burns*

Mary Burns

Immediate Past Co-Chair, Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

As a statewide public/private entity with a State Advisory Council and 12 Regional Councils, Building Bright Futures (BBF) is charged with integrating early care, health and education services delivery systems to maximize the well-being of families with young children 0-8 years of age in Vermont.

To fulfill this crucial role at the state and regional level, BBF wanted to develop an early childhood system building model, using Theory of Change, that effectively identified all the mutually reinforcing pathways leading to improved outcomes for Vermont's youngest children and their families. These system pathways serve to select and track measures and indicators of progress through "collective impact," which is defined as "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem," often through structured collaboration (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

ActKnowledge, an affiliate organization of the Center for Human Environments at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), was commissioned to design an evaluation for BBF and to assess its progress and challenges at the state and regional levels to influence and transform Vermont's early childhood system. (More information about ActKnowledge can be found in Appendix B.)

Theory of Change was introduced in the 1990s at the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change "as a tool for developing solutions to complex social problems" (Clark and Anderson, 2006). It has become more widely accepted and used for social change efforts by the United Nations, Oxfam, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Wallace Foundation and other international and national organizations. It is also effectively used to drive systemic change in states and municipalities working on education reform through the community school model.

Theory of Change allows the identification of the short-term and intermediate steps that need to occur to realize a long-term result or outcome. This model dovetails neatly with the Results-Based Accountability (RBA) framework, where "expected results (also known as goals) are clearly articulated, and data are regularly collected and reported, to address questions of whether results have been achieved (Schilder, 1997).

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- Create a statewide Theory of Change that articulated the role of BBF's State Advisory Council in Vermont's early childhood system;

- Assist in the development of regional Theories of Change that articulate the role of the 12 BBF Regional Councils in Vermont's early childhood system;

- Develop an evaluation design that could effectively measure BBF's future success in maximizing the benefits of the early childhood system at the state and regional levels; and

- Conduct interviews and report findings that would help BBF carry out its role at the state and regional levels to strengthen the system that serves young children and families.

(More information about Theory of Change and Results-based Accountability can be found in Section 3.)

This report presents the evaluation design and documents the progress BBF has made and the challenges it has faced in laying the foundation in 2014-2015 to establish its ongoing role to support systems change at the state and regional levels.

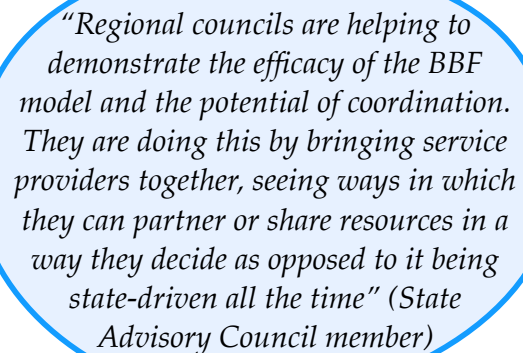# Progress in Building a Strong Foundation for Early Childhood in Vermont

This section highlights progress Building Bright Futures has made, at the state and regional levels, to put in place the foundation for Vermont's early childhood system that will maximize benefit to the well-being of children and families.

## Regional Level

- **12 Functioning BBF Regional Councils: Work of Stronger Councils Enhanced and Weaker Councils Renewed.** BBF Regional Councils are operating in each of the regions and provide a platform for the identification of regional needs and for the development of strategic approaches through which these needs can be met. BBF Regional Councils have been able to expand their membership and work towards the development of Regional Action Plans, side by side with more direct and immediate work, to address urgent issues arising in the communities.

- **BBF Regional Coordinators Strengthening Relationships and Supporting BBF Regional Councils**. The BBF Regional Coordinators employed by BBF have consistently been identified as important supports for the BBF Regional Councils in building their capacity as neutral conveners to gather the necessary stakeholders and to establish their reputations as "can do" entities through which needs can be identified and addressed. The BBF Regional Coordinators have also played an important role in establishing or reestablishing trust and positive relationships between BBF and local stakeholders, which had been damaged by cuts in BBF funding in the late 2000s.

## State Level

- **BBF State Advisory Council (SAC) Renewed With Clear Mission and Diverse Membership.** The BBF SAC has been further developed and renewed as a public/private partnership with a clear mission and with a more diverse membership that reflects the range of issues connected to positive outcomes for children and families.

*"Regional councils are helping to demonstrate the efficacy of the BBF model and the potential of coordination. They are doing this by bringing service providers together, seeing ways in which they can partner or share resources in a way they decide as opposed to it being state-driven all the time" (State Advisory Council member)*

- **Action Plan "Honeycombs" Established**. The capacity of the BBF SAC to oversee and implement the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan has been further enhanced through the establishment of "Honeycombs" based on new and existing subcommittees of the SAC, each of which will network across the state on particular goals of the Action Plan. BBF Regional Coordinators, as staff on these subcommittees, will provide key links with the regions, which should allow for the articulation

of necessary changes at state level to support regional actions.

- **Significant Progress in Preparing Data to Inform Decision-Making.** An online interactive data system for making data easily accessible on early childhood in Vermont was developed through the establishment of Vermont Insights. It is intended as Vermont's early childhood public reporting system. Vermont Insights produces, publishes and disseminates baseline and trend data on the well-being of children, families and communities at the state, regional and community levels.

   The data in Vermont Insights has been the basis for three successive BBF reports entitled *How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families?* Information already collected and disseminated has been identified as an important input into the action planning process of the BBF Regional Councils. BBF has also published a set of policy briefs on an extensive range of topics of relevance to children and families in Vermont.

- **BBF has Demonstrated the Need for Collective Impact that Embraces Strong Linkages between Action at the Local and State Levels to Maximize the Well-being of Children and Families of Vermont.** There was a considerable consensus among all those interviewed on the need for a balanced structure between the regional and state levels to support collaboration with the power to identify needs and frame effective and sustainable solutions. Without effective regional structures, it is more difficult for the State to identify or address the different needs of each region or to maximize opportunities for harnessing local resources to meet them. Equally, without effective state level structures and leadership, it is difficult for the regions to frame solutions without the possibility of policy change, resources or changes in organizational practice, which are all made at state level. The expression of this

need for regional and state level collaboration demonstrates the need for a backbone organization that supports and clarifies linkages between the state and regional levels.

- **Rapid Development and Implementation of BBF Organizational Infrastructure**. An organizational infrastructure for BBF has been established to support its goals in a relatively short span of time. This has supported the growth of BBF from a staff of one (the Executive Director with part-time administrative support) to an organization with more than 18 staff, including the BBF Regional Coordinators, a Regions Manager, an Action Plan Coordinator at state level, Communications and Finance Managers and administrative support. It also includes the establishment of Vermont Insights, the BBF data program area.

## Challenges

The report has also identified a range of challenges for BBF in establishing itself as a backbone organization. In particular:

- **Strengthening Relationships**. Managing any large-scale collective impact process presents challenges, not least the inevitable relationship issues that arise from collaborating across organizations, sectors and, in the case of BBF, between stakeholders operating at local and state levels. This can raise challenges relating to trust, competition, and fear that a person or organization's role may be infringed or diminished through the actions of others. However, BBF has also faced the additional challenge of distrust linked to the cut in its funding and operations in the late 2000s. Dealing with this legacy and strengthening relationships and trust have been described as an important achievement of BBF in the past year.

- **Future Sustainability of BBF and its Impact on Early Childhood System Building**. One of the challenges in strengthening BBF and addressing past issues of distrust has been a concern about the sustainability of funding for BBF beyond the ELC-RTT grant. This has been identified as a barrier to "buy-in" by some key stakeholders who may question the value of committing to a structure of collaboration that might not endure. This in turn raises a challenge for BBF in demonstrating the efficacy of an extensive collaboration approach in the relatively short period (for a collective impact process) of the grant period.

- **Obtaining "Buy-in" from Key Stakeholders at State Level**. Those interviewed consistently highlighted the important contribution of many state agency personnel at regional and state levels. However, concern was expressed about uneven participation of these state partners, and the need for greater "buy-in" by all agencies that would be reflected in the development of policy and practice that recognizes and supports the most effective participation of agency personnel at regional levels.

- **Strengthening the Link between State and Regional Structures.** The link between regional and state level work, the development of which is a key part of the BBF model, was often unclear to those working in the regions. In some cases the regions had identified lack of state level support as a particular barrier to their work and urged a greater focus on building this capacity. However, there also seemed to be a lack of awareness of work that was happening at state level – for example, the role of the BBF Executive Director in supporting the BBF SAC or the progress made in developing the "Honeycombs."

- **Change in Leadership**. The Executive Director of BBF has moved on to new things as of January 8, 2016. Her departure presents a significant challenge for BBF, especially to ensure consistency and stability in the structures that have and continue to be developed.

- **Tensions Relating to System Building versus Direct Services.** Tensions have arisen from perceptions that the development of the BBF system building approach draws resources away from services that could address needs more quickly and directly. This tension can be compounded if collaboration seems unduly focused on "process" and when the potential and value of a system building approach is not demonstrated in a very practical way. A number of people interviewed in the course of the evaluation noted that the perceived division between system building and direct service provision is somewhat overblown, and gave examples of how service provision and system building support one another in meeting needs. For example, providing a service has been a way of testing the scale or dimensions of a need and what components are necessary to meet it in the most comprehensive way possible. This can then be pursued through the BBF structures. The question therefore is not one of system building versus direct service provision for BBF, but rather how direct service provision can support systemic changes in early childhood.

Highway Sign, Rutland, 1939

- **Resistance to More "Planning" and Planning Methods.** Linked to the tensions around system building versus service provision has been a resistance to what some people have described as too much process and planning. There has also been some confusion about the application of different methodologies, including the use of Theory of Change for the preparation of Regional Action Plans when there had been agreement already and a mandate to use Results-based Accountability. A key challenge for BBF, therefore, is to demonstrate the efficacy of the regional planning activities undertaken in leading to actionable plans that reflect local needs while at the same time linking these to results areas of the Action Plan.

- **Barriers to Data Collection.** A key issue noted by BBF is that data gathered by Vermont Insights depends on the willingness and capacity of other organizations to share data. Data barriers at a local level identified by BBF have included issues around confidentiality in working with small local populations, and the fact that local data may not be collected in a standard way across all regions of the state and therefore comparisons can be difficult. Another barrier identified is that BBF regions are not completely contiguous with other jurisdictional regions for which various agencies collect data.

## Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been drawn from the early findings and the evaluation design process. These are summarized below and explained in detail in the main report.

1. **Remain committed to the outcomes BBF needs to achieve as a backbone organization.**

2. **Continue to develop and clarify the links between state and regional level early childhood structures.**

3. **New leadership should build on structures developed while adding their own ideas.**

4. **Continue building relationships and trust.**

5. **Institutionalize linkages and relationships through supportive policy and practice.**

6. **Document and share accomplishments that demonstrate the value of the BBF model.**

7. **Improve data collection and sharing efforts so that policy-makers can make decisions informed by data.**

8. **Conduct evaluations over 18 month periods to test achievement of outcomes in the BBF Theory of Change.**

# 1. Introduction

As a statewide public/private entity with a State Advisory Council and 12 Regional Councils, Building Bright Futures (BBF) is charged with integrating early care, health and education services delivery systems to maximize the well-being of families with young children aged 0-8 years.

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(More information about Theory of Change and Results-based Accountability may be found in Section 3 of this report on page 6.)



Cuttingsville School and Teachers, 1912

This report presents the evaluation design and documents the progress BBF has made and the challenges it has faced in laying the foundation in 2014-2015 to establish its ongoing role to support systems change at the state and regional levels.

This report is funded with resources provided by the Early Learning Challenge-Race to The Top, a $36.9 million, four-year federal grant to help build a high-quality and accessible statewide early childhood system so that all young children will be ready to succeed in kindergarten and beyond, awarded to the State of Vermont in December 2013.

## The Challenges and Benefits of Collaboration

Ensuring that every child is healthy, able to learn in school, and able to grow up to lead a productive and happy life, is extremely complicated. This goal can be challenged by a complex range of factors including unhelpful policies, lack of funds, and individual beliefs and behaviors. The sheer number of providers and involved staff, legislators and services poses a considerable challenge to working together effectively.  For example, nearly 100 organizations have been identified as working on some element of Vermont's early childhood system.

The BBF approach is to respond directly to these fundamental difficulties in collaborative work by building a stable structure that supports work at local and state levels and helps ensure that actions at each level are mutually supportive and are together achieving results for children and families.

## Collective Impact and the Role of BBF as a Backbone Organization

The rationale for building such a stable structure for effective collaboration fits firmly within the concept of "collective impact," which is based on the recognition that "…*social change can come from the gradual improvement of an entire system over time, not just from a single breakthrough by an individual organization*" (Turner et al., 2012). BBF in this respect is a backbone organization, one that provides the supporting infrastructure necessary for achieving and sustaining collective impact. The expectation that collaboration can occur without such a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent causes of failure (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

The research on collective impact has also highlighted the importance of evaluating and communicating the value of backbone organizations in collective impact initiatives. In particular, evaluation needs to *paint a clear picture for stakeholders—board members, staff, donors, volunteers, current and potential grant recipients—of what success looks like and why this strategy is ultimately worth pursuing* (Turner et al., 2012).

This evaluation framework developed for BBF has been designed to paint such a clear picture using Theory of Change and Results-based Accountability to identify results and the steps necessary to get there over time.

# 2. Building Bright Futures as the Backbone for Early Childhood System Building Work

## BBF's Place in Early Childhood System Building in Vermont

Building Bright Futures (BBF) is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization that functions as a private/public partnership between state and local government and non-profit organizations. The role of BBF has been established in statute, specifically Vermont Act 104, which charges BBF with assuring that Vermonters are provided with an "accountable, results based, comprehensive, and coherent system of high-quality early childhood services (Vermont ELC-RTT Application for Funding). The law charges BBF with assuring that the early childhood services are coordinated, aligned with established early learning and development standards, and geographically and financially accessible to all families with young children.  As previously noted, BBF has also been given a mandate in the Action Plan to act as a steward.

BBF provides the governance structure for Vermont's early childhood care, health and education system. This governance structure seeks to align solutions at the local level with effective policy at the state level to create improvements in access, quality, and affordability of early care, health and education for young children aged 0-8 and their families.

BBF, as a staffed entity, dates to a 2006 executive order and began in another form in 1992. The 2006 executive order created 12 BBF Regional Councils intended to oversee and coordinate early childhood services.  BBF's task is to lead the way forward in creating the high-quality system of early childhood services called for in Act 104. To do so BBF must liaise with state agencies – the Agency of Education, Agency of Human Services and its departments (which include the Departments of Health, Child Development Division/ Children's Integrated Service teams and the Department for Children and Families); the twelve BBF Regional Councils; and many community and private sector partners.

The success of BBF depends upon its ability to interact effectively with these and other actors in multiple modes: liaison and communication, consensus-building, capacity-building, coordination, support, and guidance. As such, the early childhood system in Vermont can best be understood through the lens of "collective impact."

## Collective Impact

The concept of "collective impact" emerges from the growing recognition that sustained social change is more likely to result from effective cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated interventions of individual organizations.

In their influential Stanford Social Innovation Review article "Collective Impact," John Kania and Mark Kramer (2011) advocate for collective impact as an effective means of working on complex social issues where no single entity has the authority or resources to bring about the necessary change.  The authors distinguish collective impact from collaboration in that the partners in collective impact agree to organize their work around a common agenda. Individually they continue to do their own work, and they may disagree on the means toward a given set of ends, but the commitment to align their work around a shared

goal is a distinguishing mark of collective impact as compared to collaboration generally.

In contrast to collective impact, the "isolated impact" approach typically involves change brought by a single organization with the expectation that as success is demonstrated, the model will be scaled up as other organizations see its value and adapt it to their work. With collective impact, rather than hoping for broad adoption of a model based on an isolated success, a variety of actors who collectively have the resources and authority to make significant change align their work toward common goals. (Kania and Kramer, 2011)

Five necessary attributes of collective impact have been identified. These are:

1) **Developing a Common Agenda**, where all participants have a shared vision for change, even though they may not be in complete agreement with the nature of a problem or with every action developed to achieve the vision.

2) **Shared Measurement Systems,** where there is agreement on the form of data that needs to be collected among all participants in the collective impact effort in order to measure results and hold participants accountable.

3) **Mutually Reinforcing Activities** – Evidence shows that collective impact initiatives depend on a diverse group of stakeholders working together, not by requiring all participants to do the same thing, but by encouraging each participant to undertake the activities they do best in a way that supports and is coordinated with others.

4) **Continuous Communication** is critical across the many players involved in the collective impact initiative to build trust, assure mutual objectives and appreciate common motivation (FSG, 2012).

5) The fifth condition is the need for a **Backbone Support Organization**. The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

## "Backbone" Support Organization

The importance of a backbone organization to collective impact and the stages of its growth has also been highlighted in the research literature on collective strategies. As Kania and Kramer (2011) write, "Collective impact requires that funders support a long-term process of social change without identifying any particular solution in advance [and] have the patience to stay with an initiative for some years, recognizing that social change can come from the gradual improvement of an entire system over time, not just from a single breakthrough by an individual organization" (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

Kania and Kramer (2011) outline six major activities common to backbone organizations:

1. **Guiding Vision and Strategy.**

2. **Supporting Alignment of Activities.**

3. **Establishing Shared Measurement Practices.**

4. **Building Public Will.**

5. **Advancing Policy.**

6. **Mobilizing Funding.**

The authors of another study, specifically on backbone organizations, write that a backbone organization organizes cross-sector partners to transform a patchwork of existing programs (Turner et al., 2012). This study provides evidence of successful backbone organizations proceeding in stages. For example, in early stages of a collective impact initiative, a backbone organization is likely to prioritize guiding vision and strategy and supporting aligned activities. As the initiative matures, the backbone organizations may shift to shared measurement, which provides critical support for its work in building public

will and advancing policy change. (Turner et al., 2012).

For many years, Vermont has moved towards "increasing coordination and integration of early learning and development programs" (ELC-RTT application, p. 101). The ELC-RTT grant application cites overlap and fragmentation in the system in justifying the need for Race-to-the-Top federal funding.

Given the imperative of coordinating efforts in many places and at many levels and a collaborative tradition, the collective impact model for early childhood in Vermont has considerable power for interpreting BBF's role as a backbone organization.

Service providers and agencies have historically collaborated in early childhood system building efforts with BBF having played an advisory and interpretive role. Now, with the ELC-RTT grant award, BBF is growing into the new role of backbone organization. More is expected of a backbone organization, not only data interpretation, reporting and advising; but increasingly driving system-wide improvement through advocacy and building public will, capacity-building, and active coordination of efforts at many levels. Such a great change in both role and expectations can stir resentment or disappointment among stakeholders who have been used to a looser collaborative model. These stakeholders may expect more muscular behavior on the part of BBF and concomitant improvement in service delivery and its impact on children and families.



Road to South Shaftsbury, 1924

# 3. The BBF Theories of Change: A State and Regional Process

## Theory of Change and Results-based Accountability: An Overview

As noted earlier, BBF has used Theory of Change (ToC) and Results-Based Accountability (RBA). ToC recognizes that many intermediate changes in condition—or results—may be needed to reach a goal, whereas RBA prompts articulation of an end result without the early and intermediate results. ToC defines and diagrams those intermediate ends in causal pathways. In doing so, ToC provides the means of measuring and reporting progress in the early and middle stages of the initiative, where modifications can be more easily made.



Courtesy of the Vermont Collection at Middlebury College

**Proctorsville School Class**

Equally significant in a collective impact context is the power of the graphically depicted causal pathway to plot 1) the pathways pursued by the collaborating state, local, and non-profit parties and how they interconnect; and 2) to plot all the points in time at which BBF needs to influence the behavior of other actors in the arena, including its collaborators, to bring about the needed changes in conditions all along the way.

## Developing the Statewide and Regional BBF Theories of Change

Theories of Change for BBF have been developed at the state and regional levels.

- ActKnowledge worked with BBF Regional Coordinators and BBF Regional Council members to develop Theories of Change specific to their regions, which are intended to form the basis for their Regional Action Plans. The BBF Regional Councils and Coordinators are further developing the preconditions for achievement in the result areas to reflect the particular context of each region.

- A Statewide Theory of Change for BBF was developed with the BBF Executive Director and BBF staff, drawing on the result areas that the regions agreed were common to them all. The statewide Theory of Change then traced out the intermediary outcomes necessary to achieve these results. In doing so it identified what outcomes BBF, as a backbone organization, needs to achieve to support the state and regional level outcomes. The next step is to work with the BBF SAC and a broader group of legislators, providers and constituents to review the model developed and identify any changes they feel are needed.

The main result areas of the overall state and regional Theories of Change were agreed upon by the BBF central office and the BBF Regional Coordinators in April 2015, and are aligned with the goals of Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan. These result areas are outlined in Figure 1, below. Figure 1 shows that the top level result that the early childhood system aims to achieve is that "All children 0-8 in the regions have met their full potential" and that the key preconditions for this result are that 1) The basic needs and social and emotional needs of children are being met; 2) That children are healthy (health in this respect covering mental and physical health); and 3) That children

are learning and that this encompasses math, reading and writing but also social and communication skills and critical thinking and problem solving skills. Figure 1 illustrates how these result areas align with Goals 1 through 3 of the Action Plan.

The main result areas were then developed into a full statewide Theory of Change. The key preconditions in the statewide ToC are summarized in Figure 2, next page, and mapped in detail in Figure 3.

## Figure 1. Agreed Result Areas
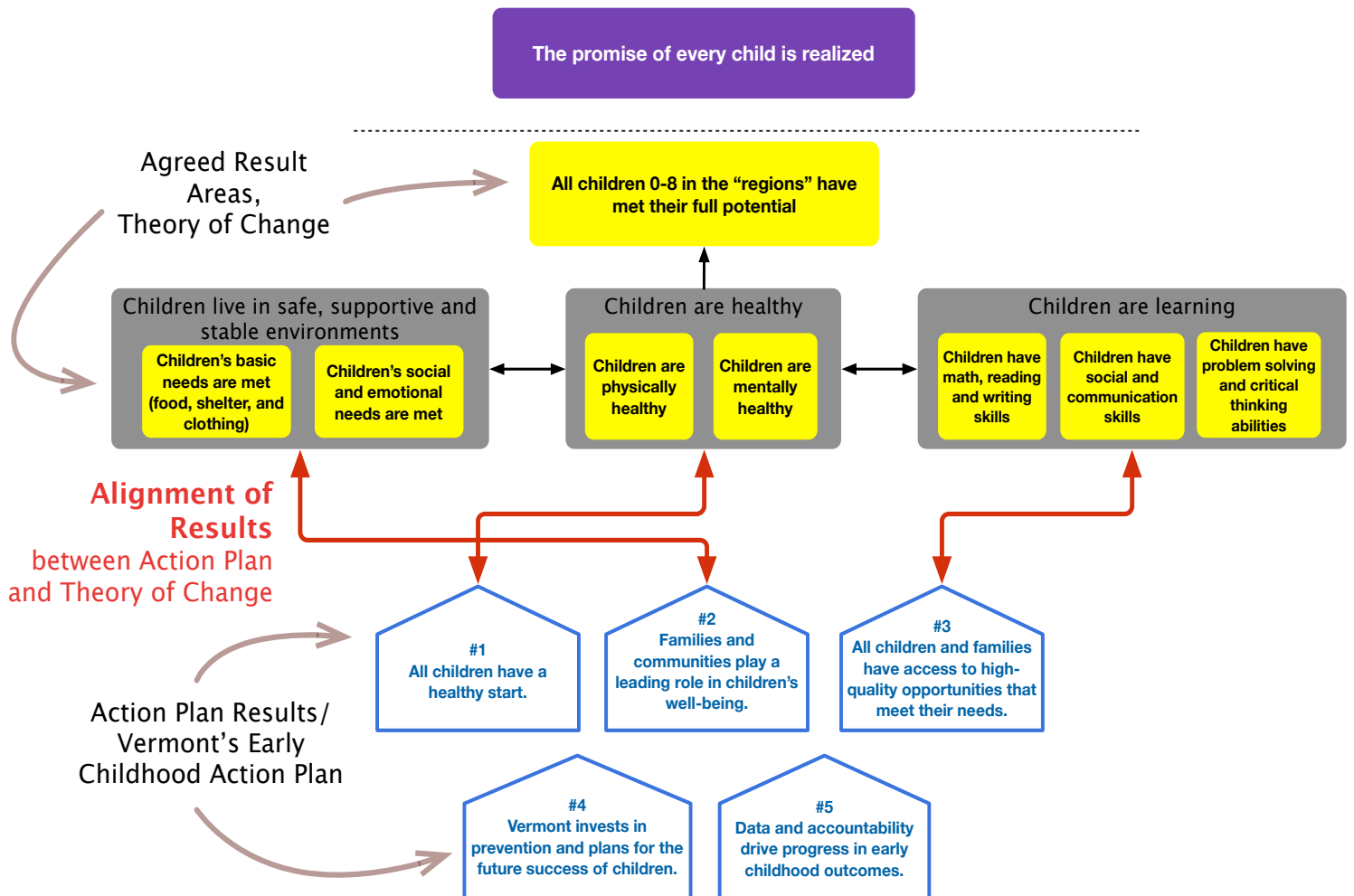
## Figure 2. Summary of BBF Statewide Outcomes

| Component of the Theory of Change | | Key Results / Outcomes / Preconditions |
|---|---|---|
| Results | All children 0-8 in the "regions" have met their full potential. | Children live in safe, supportive, stable environments |
| | | Children are healthy |
| | | Children are learning |
| Systems Developed | Regional Level | Successful practices are embedded in the system (via policy and organizational change) |
| | | Regions have adequate funds to provide high quality service for all children |
| | | Responsive and effective collaboration and coordination |
| | State Level | Funds/policies/resources for prevention/personal asset building are sufficient to substantially reduce need and costs of treatment |
| | | Sufficient funds are invested in quality services for all children across all regions of Vermont |
| | | Policies exist to support families regionally across all sectors and businesses |
| | | State requires and implements family-friendly policies |
| Alignment & Balance of State and Regional Systems | BBF as Backbone Organization for Early Childhood System in Vermont | All state and regional resources necessary to meet the needs of children and families are effectively harnessed |
| | | Intersection of BBF state and regional infrastructures drives coordination across agencies and sectors |
| | | Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan is implemented and consistently adapted based on lessons learned |

# Reading the BBF Statewide Theory of Change

BBF's Statewide Theory of Change (Figure 3) describes desired results for early childhood in Vermont. Theory of Change starts with the result areas at the top (i.e., the agreed outcomes for children's well-being), like RBA, but then works back from these result areas to trace out in "causal pathways" all the conditions ("preconditions") that need to be in place for these results to be achieved. These go right down to the foundational preconditions that pertain to putting the support system for collaboration in place.

A feature of the BBF model described in the Theory of Change is the necessary balance and relationship between outcomes at regional and state levels and the role of BBF in ensuring that these related outcomes are sustained and achieve results for children.

One finds clear linkages between outcomes at state and regional levels. For example, state expenditures on services will be more effective if linked to regional collaboration that allows for an accurate identification of need. Such coordination also improves the cost-effectiveness of state expenditures.

Equally, the regions benefit from state policies and practices that resource local action but also allow for flexibility to target the specific needs of local communities.

Reading down from the top of Figure 3 one sees preconditions at **Regional level,** on the left, in blue. Preconditions at **State level** appear on the right in turquoise. Preconditions that BBF needs to fulfill as the **Backbone Organization**, appear in the middle, in red.

- The main outcomes at R**egional level** (which are preconditions for the results) are that successful practices are embedded in the system and that the regions have adequate funds to provide high quality services. This in turn requires responsive collaboration and coordination, which are the next level of outcomes down on the left. And preconditions for these in turn are that all stakeholders recognize the value of collaboration, are aware of the needs of children and so on until you get to the foundational preconditions of putting in place or renewing regional structures to support collaboration.

- On the right hand side are the **State-level** outcomes necessary to achieve outcomes for children which at the top include outcomes such as the existence of policies at state level to support families across regions and sectors and provision of sufficient funds to support effective services. Preconditions for these then include the existence of political will, awareness on the part of policy makers of the needs of children and so on down towards the foundational preconditions of having an infrastructure to support collaboration, including private/public collaboration at state level.

- **BBF in the Theory of Change**. As the backbone institution for Vermont's early childhood system, BBF, as a single statewide network, serves to identify regional and state needs and solutions that result in the well-being of children and families in Vermont. A key outcome BBF is working toward in this respect (shown in red in the middle of the ToC graphic), is in ensuring that "All state and regional resources necessary to meet the needs of children and families are effectively harnessed." This in turn requires BBF to "leverage public and private sector funds" on the one hand; and on the other hand to ensure that the collaboration process leads to "documented savings in funds while enhancing services."
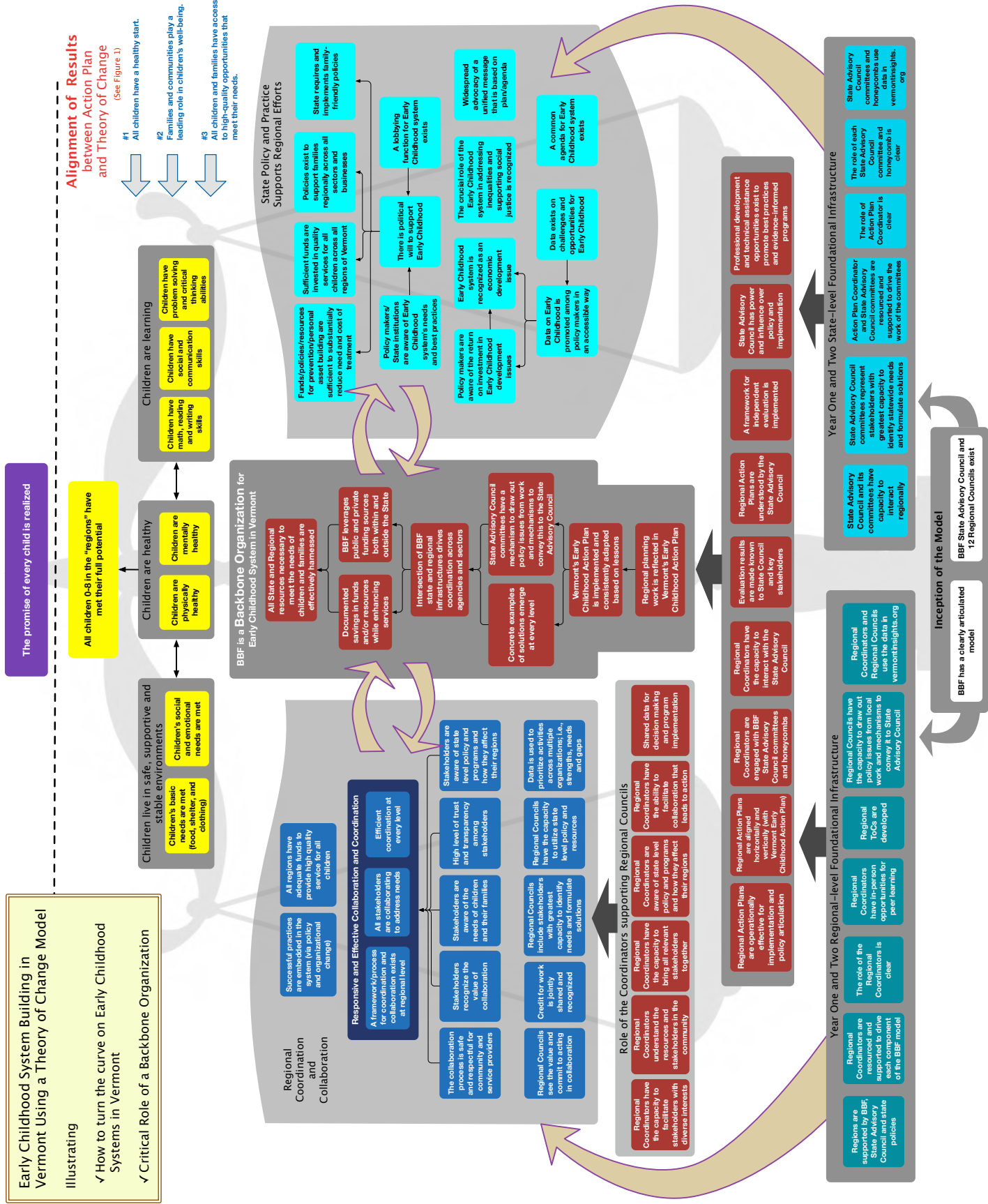
Figure 3, overleaf, presents the complete Statewide Theory of Change.

# Figure 3. Statewide Theory of Change

Early Childhood System Building in Vermont Using a Theory of Change Model

**Illustrating**

✓ How to turn the curve on Early Childhood Systems in Vermont

✓ Critical Role of a Backbone Organization

**Alignment of Results** between Action Plan and Theory of Change
(See Figure 1)

#1 All children have a healthy start.

#2 Families and communities play a leading role in children's well-being.

#3 All children and families have access to high-quality opportunities that meet their needs.

The promise of every child is realized

All children 0-8 in the "regions" have met their full potential

## Children are learning

Children have math, reading and writing skills

Children have social and communication skills

Children have problem solving and critical thinking abilities

## Children are healthy

Children are physically healthy

Children are mentally healthy

## Children live in safe, supportive and stable environments

Children's basic needs are met (food, shelter, and clothing)

Children's social and emotional needs are met

## State Policy and Practice Supports Regional Efforts

State requires and implements family-friendly policies

Policies exist to support families regionally across all sectors and businesses

A lobbying function for Early Childhood system exists

Widespread advocacy of a unified message that is based on plan/agenda

Sufficient funds are invested in quality services for all children across all regions of Vermont

There is political will to support Early Childhood

The crucial role of the Early Childhood system in addressing inequalities and supporting social justice is recognized

A common agenda for Early Childhood system exists

Funds/policies/resources for prevention/personal asset building are sufficient to substantially reduce need and cost of treatment

Policy makers/ State institutions are aware of Early Childhood system's needs and best practices

Early Childhood system is recognized as an economic development issue

Data exists on challenges and opportunities for Early Childhood

Policy makers are aware of the return on investment in Early Childhood development issues

Data on Early Childhood is promoted among policy makers in an accessible way

## BBF is a Backbone Organization for Early Childhood System in Vermont

All State and Regional resources necessary to meet the needs of children and families are effectively harnessed

BBF leverages public and private funding sources both within and outside the State

Documented savings in funds and/or resources while enhancing services

Intersection of BBF state and regional infrastructures drives coordination across agencies and sectors

State Advisory Council committees have a mechanism to draw out policy issues from work and mechanisms to convey this to the State Advisory Council

Concrete examples of solutions emerge at every level

Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan is implemented and consistently adapted based on lessons

Regional planning work is reflected in Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan

## Responsive and Effective Collaboration and Coordination

A framework/process for coordination and collaboration exists at regional level

Efficient coordination at every level

All stakeholders are collaborating to address needs

Successful practices are embedded in the system (via policy and organizational change)

All regions have adequate funds to provide high quality service for all children

Stakeholders are aware of state level policy and programs and how they affect their regions

Stakeholders recognize the value of collaboration

Stakeholders are aware of the needs of children and their families

High level of trust and transparency among stakeholders

Regional Councils have the capacity to utilize state level policy and resources

Data is used to prioritize activities across multiple organizations; i.e., strengths, needs and gaps

Credit for work is jointly shared and recognized

Regional Councils include stakeholders with greatest capacity to identify needs and formulate solutions

Shared data for decision making and program implementation

The collaboration process is safe and respectful for community and service providers

Regional Coordinators have the capacity to bring all relevant stakeholders together

Regional Coordinators understand the resources and stakeholders in the community

Regional Coordinators have the capacity to facilitate stakeholders with diverse interests

## Role of the Coordinators supporting Regional Councils

Regional Action Plans are aligned horizontally and vertically with Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan)

Regional Coordinators are engaged with BBF State Advisory Council committees and honeycombs

Regional Coordinators have the ability to facilitate collaboration that leads to action

Regional Action Plans are operationally effective for implementation and policy articulation

Regional Coordinators are aware of state level policy and programs and how they affect their regions

Regional Coordinators have the capacity to interact with the State Advisory Council

The role of the Regional Coordinators is clear

Regional Coordinators have opportunities for peer learning

Regional Coordinators are resourced and supported to drive each component of the BBF model

## Year One and Two Regional-level Foundational Infrastructure

Regional Coordinators and Regional Councils use the data in vermontinsights.org

Regional Councils have the capacity to draw out local work and mechanisms to convey it to State Advisory Council

Regional ToCs are developed

Regions are supported by BBF, State Advisory Council and state policies

## Year One and Two State-level Foundational Infrastructure

Professional development and technical assistance opportunities exist to promote best practices and evidence-informed programs

State Advisory Council has power and influence over policy and implementation

A framework for independent evaluation is implemented

Regional Action Plans are understood by the State Advisory Council

Evaluation results are made known to State Council and key stakeholders

Action Plan Coordinator and State Advisory Council committees are resourced and supported to drive the work of the committees

State Advisory Council committees represent stakeholders with greatest capacity to identify statewide needs and formulate solutions

State Advisory Council and its committees have capacity to interact regionally

State Advisory Council committees and honeycombs use data in vermontinsights.org

The role of each State Advisory Council committee and honeycomb is clear

The role of Action Plan Coordinator is clear

## Inception of the Model

BBF State Advisory Council and 12 Regional Councils exist

BBF has a clearly articulated model

Regional Coordination and Collaboration

## Foundational Outcomes

The foundational outcomes, as noted, are changes in conditions that need to be achieved before outcomes farther up the diagram can be realized. The foundational outcomes should be understood as preconditions, or prerequisites, to outcomes farther up the pathway. This report focuses in particular on progress made and challenges experienced in putting in place these foundational outcomes.

## Foundational Preconditions

## for BBF

The foundational preconditions necessary for BBF to be an effective backbone organization in this collective impact initiative apply to the effectiveness of Regional Action Plans and their alignment with the Action Plan. Similarly, BBF Regional Coordinators must have the capacity to effectively engage with the BBF State Advisory Council and its committees and Honeycombs.

Additionally, the BBF State Advisory Council must understand the Regional Action Plans, be apprised of evaluation findings, and have influence over policy and implementation. There is also a precondition around availability of professional development and technical assistance to promote best practices and evidence-based program design.
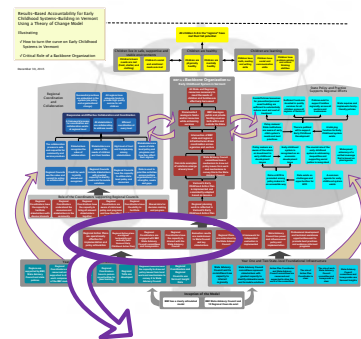




| Regional Action Plans are operationally effective for implementation and policy articulation | Regional Action Plans are aligned horizontally and vertically (with Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan) | Regional Coordinators are engaged with BBF State Advisory Council committees and Honeycombs | Regional Coordinators have the capacity to interact with the State Advisory Council | Evaluation are made to State Council stakeh |

| egional<br>nators have<br>apacity to<br>ct with the<br>e Advisory<br>Council | Evaluation results<br>are made known<br>to State Council<br>and key<br>stakeholders | Regional Action<br>Plans are<br>understood by the<br>State Advisory<br>Council | A framework for<br>independent<br>evaluation is<br>implemented | State Advisory<br>Council has power<br>and influence over<br>policy and<br>implementation | Professional development<br>and technical assistance<br>opportunities exist to<br>promote best practices<br>and evidence-informed<br>programs |
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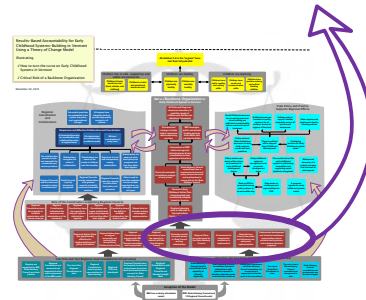


## Foundational Preconditions at the Regional Level

These are the early outcomes—foundational preconditions—needed at the regional level for BBF to remain on track. BBF Regional Coordinators are supported by state bodies and policies, their roles are defined and they have peer-learning opportunities. The regions all have regional Theories of Change and use data from Vermont Insights. Also, BBF Regional Councils must be able to draw out from all the local work the key findings and insights of importance to policy, and have the means of feeding these policy issues up to the BBF State Advisory Council.
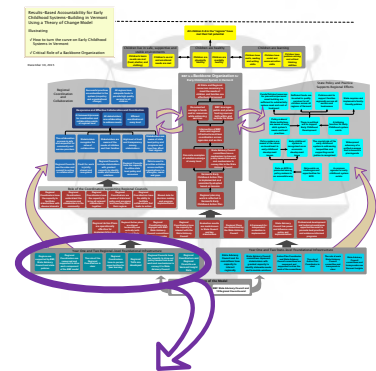


### Year One and Two Regional–level Foun...

| Regions are supported by BBF, State Advisory Council and state policies | Regional Coordinators are resourced and supported to drive each component of the BBF model | The role of the Regional Coordinators is clear | Regional Coordinators have in-person opportunities for peer learning |
|---|---|---|---|

### Regional–level Foundational Infrastructure

| Regional Coordinators have in-person opportunities for peer learning | Regional ToCs are developed | Regional Councils have the capacity to draw out policy issues from local work and mechanisms to convey it to State Advisory Council | Regional Coordinators and Regional Councils use Vermont Insight Data |
|---|---|---|---|

# Foundational Preconditions at the State Level

State actors—the BBF State Advisory Council and its committees and Honeycombs—need to have clear roles and be able to communicate and otherwise interact effectively with BBF Regional Councils. The Council Committees must be allied with the right stakeholders, those best equipped to perceive and help formulate solutions at the state level. Also, the Action Plan Coordinator needs sufficient support and resources to keep the committees and Honeycombs on track.

## Two State–level Foundational Infrastructure

| Action Plan Coordinator and State Advisory Council committees are resourced and supported to drive the work of the committees | The role of Action Plan Coordinator is clear | The role of each State Advisory Council committee and honeycomb is clear | State Advisory Council committees and honeycombs use Vermont Insights |
|---|---|---|---|

## Year One and Two State–level Foundatic

| State Advisory Council and its committees have capacity to interact regionally | State Advisory Council committees represent stakeholders with greatest capacity to identify statewide needs and formulate solutions | Action Plan Coordinator and State Advisory Council committees are resourced and supported to drive the work of the committees |
|---|---|---|

# 4. Progress of BBF's Early Childhood System Building Efforts 2014-15

## Accomplishments and Facilitating Factors

System building takes time and, in line with the BBF Theories of Change, it was to be expected that the most discernible outcomes in the first year of substantial funding would be around putting the foundations of the system into place. At a regional level these

organizational infrastructure necessary to support this work.

Because such progress has been made in laying these foundations, other preconditions in the Theory of Change for building an early childhood system are beginning to be realized, in some cases earlier than anticipated. Each of these outcomes, which are set forth in detail in Figure 3 (page 10), provide the base of a system with considerable potential for realizing the goals established by BBF for the well-being of children and families.

developed by BBF over the past year (the BBF Regional Coordinators in particular) has enhanced the work of the stronger BBF Regional Councils and helped renew those that had diminished from lack of staffing capacity. BBF Regional Coordinators and BBF Regional Council members highlighted the building of relationships with local stakeholders as a key outcome for the year, including the rebuilding of relationships and trust, which had been damaged by funding cuts in the past.



Snow scene, Windsor County



West Hartford, on White River



Farmer's son and collie dog

included the employment, support for, and orientation of 12 BBF Regional Coordinators and the clarification of their precise role. At state level these included measures to support and renew the BBF State Advisory Council (SAC), the establishment of "Honeycombs" or sub-committees of the SAC, and the establishment of an

## Progress at the Regional Level

The BBF Regional Councils continued to operate in one form or another after the cut in BBF funding in the late 2000s. However, there was considerable consensus among all stakeholders interviewed that the support structure

BBF Regional Coordinators have approached their work with a good deal of strategic intentionality. This has involved a combination of support for the effective governance and development of the BBF Regional Council membership and Regional Action Plan development side by side with more direct and immediate

work to address urgent issues arising in the communities. For example:

- **BBF Regional Council membership built or reestablished**. The BBF Regional Councils have sought to build or rebuild their membership in a way that strikes the right balance between identifying needs and framing solutions. This has led to active outreach to those, such as parents and families, who are particularly well placed to articulate the needs of children and families within their regions. The BBF Regional Councils have also sought members from across the public and private sectors, especially those with the capacity, or in the case of state agencies, authority, to make decisions around how services could be developed at local level to meet the needs identified.

- **Decision-making streamlined**. BBF Regional Councils have also sought to streamline their work to build their reputation as a place where, as one council member put it, "things get done." This has included a whole set of activities undertaken around governance, including the establishment of "steering committees" or other structures to ensure that the decisions of the BBF Regional Councils are followed up and to help steer key strategic activities such as the development of the Regional Action Plans. The support of the BBF Regional Coordinators for these structures was highlighted as an essential resource.

- **New members identified based on comprehensive understanding of the needs of children and families**. As their work has proceeded, many of the BBF Regional Councils have successively reached out to organizations or services that may not have been involved in a BBF Regional Council before and/or may not

Children having snowball fight, 1940

have considered how their services relate to the needs of children in the particular region. Examples include active efforts in regions with high levels of drug use and incarceration to involve law enforcement agencies so that the process of dealing with these issues is less traumatic to children. In areas with high levels of homelessness, there have been efforts to draw in more organizations and other stakeholders related to housing policy and provision. In making the case for such involvement, the value of the Vermont Insights statistical reports, which include a wide set of indicators of well-being (including data on crime and housing) was highlighted. This supports the BBF-Vermont Insights approach to disseminating regional data on children, families and the communities where they live.

- **Developing a Common Vision, Theory of Change and Action Plans for the regions.** As part of the development process for the first year of the ELC - RTT grant, each BBF Regional Council with the support of the BBF Regional Coordinators and external technical assistance provided through BBF, are required to prepare Regional Action Plans using a combined Theory of Change and RBA approach. As noted, important progress has been made in reaching a common vision for the regions through this process, focused on three key long-term population outcomes for children and families.

Each region has developed its own structure for preparing the Regional Action Plans, including the formation of steering or work groups with particular subject matter experience to draw on the strategic knowledge available to prepare comprehensive plans. The intention, as outlined in the Theory of Change, is to develop plans that relate

to the needs and opportunities for addressing them within each region. At the same time, the intention is to ensure that the Regional Action Plans are aligned with the State Early Childhood Action Plan in a way that ensures that policies and practices at state level support regional efforts to meet regional needs.

- **Events and direct services facilitated and provided**. The BBF Regional Councils have also provided the platform for holding events on urgent issues arising in the community and in some cases, the provision of direct services to support capacity in the community (for example, training). Although BBF is focused on systems building rather than on direct service provision, the capacity to address urgent issues immediately, and, where necessary, to fund or help organize a direct service, can be an important part of building the credibility of BBF at a local level. Partners drawn together for the provision of a particular service can in turn become the stakeholders in a broader and more strategic engagement around an issue.
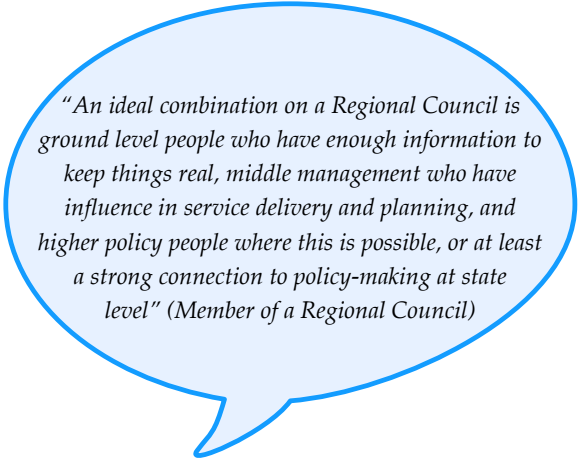
## Facilitating Factors at a Regional Level

Regional and State Council members interviewed in the course of the evaluation consistently highlighted the role played by the BBF Regional Coordinators in these achievements and in laying the foundation for an effective regional structure. In particular, the BBF Regional Coordinators have provided the time and expertise necessary to follow up on the work of the BBF Regional Councils and to reach out to various stakeholders in the community to encourage their engagement with BBF to enhance collective action towards realizing the well-being of children and families.

The BBF Regional Councils and BBF Regional Coordinators have approached their work with a good deal of strategic intentionality. This has involved a combination of support for the effective governance and development of the BBF Regional Council membership and BBF Regional Action Plan development side by side with more direct and immediate work to address urgent issues arising in the communities.

Coordinators in turn highlighted a number of factors that facilitated their work. In particular:

- BBF Regional Coordinators, in most cases, were not starting from scratch and could link into an existing regional infrastructure of BBF Regional

> *"An ideal combination on a Regional Council is ground level people who have enough information to keep things real, middle management who have influence in service delivery and planning, and higher policy people where this is possible, or at least a strong connection to policy-making at state level" (Member of a Regional Council)*

Councils that had endured despite previous cuts in funding. This was particularly the case in regions where the BBF Regional Councils were strong. The strength of these regions was also considered a resource for other regions.

- Coordinators also mentioned the importance of organizational support from BBF more broadly, especially the support of the BBF Regions Manager. Of particular importance in this respect were opportunities provided for peer learning (one of the foundational preconditions in the BBF Theory of Change) and the support, as mentioned, of colleagues with greater

experience. For example, the experience and knowledge of the BBF Regional Coordinator in Bennington, who has been a Coordinator for a long time, was cited as an important resource for other BBF Regional Coordinators.

- Having Regional Council members with some authority to make decisions at BBF Regional Council meetings and to facilitate follow-up by the BBF Regional Coordinator on decisions made by the BBF Regional Council was critically important. This was considered particularly important in the case of state agencies and how they were represented at regional level in a way that could lead to support for initiatives or possible changes in institutional practice or policy. With regard to policy, a key issue was how the policy aspects of meeting needs could be most effectively pursued through the institutional structure of each organization.

- Having access to the BBF Direct Service grant was identified by BBF Regional Coordinators as an important tool in establishing the credibility of BBF at local level and in stimulating actions that could lead to more systemic change. For example, providing a service can be a way of testing whether a particular need exists or for gaining an understanding of the dimensions of that need.
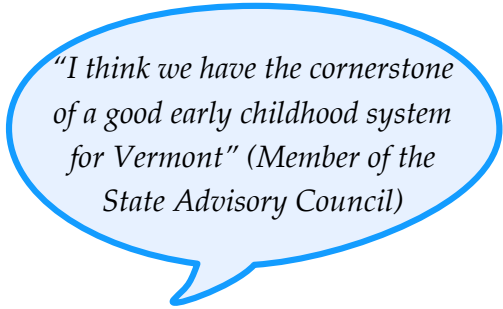
## Progress at the State Level

There was a sense among those interviewed that the BBF State Advisory Council (SAC) was more focused with a much clearer vision than it had before. The role of the Executive Director in attracting new membership was also highlighted, and the contribution this made in giving the SAC a much stronger profile as a public/private partnership.

Progress has also been made in putting in place other parts of the "foundational" infrastructure for state level action set out in the BBF Theory of Change.

In particular:

- BBF has been very intentional in seeking to improve the capacity of the SAC committees to represent a wider set of stakeholders and to have clearer and more focused roles. This has been done through the establishment of "Honeycombs", which are existing committees of the SAC that have agreed to take on the purview of everything that falls within one of the six result areas of Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan.

*"I think we have the cornerstone of a good early childhood system for Vermont" (Member of the State Advisory Council)*

- Four out of an intended six Honeycombs have been established so far. In agreeing to be Honeycombs, each committee has agreed to reach out to all those engaged in work for children and families, across all sectors, that is related to the particular result area the Honeycomb has taken on. This information will then be gathered and disseminated through newsletters, providing an outline of what is going on around each result area of the Action Plan and how people can get connected to the work.

- BBF Regional Coordinators have been assigned to each of the Honeycombs, which should contribute to the capacity of the committees to interact with the regions (another foundational outcome in the Theory of Change). The need for this, and other "conduits" between regional and

state level work, has been consistently raised by all those interviewed.

Important progress has also been made at state level in building the evidence base on early childhood to inform actions at regional and state levels. This has included the establishment and launch by BBF of Vermont Insights as the online interactive data system for making data easily accessible on early childhood. It is intended as Vermont's early childhood public reporting system. Vermont Insights produces, publishes and disseminates baseline and trend data on the well-being of children, families and communities at the state, regional and community levels.

The data in vermontinsights.org has been the basis for three successive BBF reports entitled *How Are Vermont's Young Children and Families?*

Vermont Insights has also initiated a process and publication to identify and report data assets and data gaps on critical early childhood issues. The publication is a technical series called "Data Asset and Gap Analysis Series," with the first report addressing Vermont's Universal Pre-Kindergarten Education Law, Act 166 (February 2015).

BBF has also published a range of policy briefs designed to focus attention on issues facing children and families in Vermont. These have covered subjects such as prevention of bullying, the prevalence and impact of child neglect, the importance of family-friendly work policies, parental incarceration and its effect on childhood health, and addressing health and educational disparities among children.[1]

The value of these publications and of the data on the Vermont Insights website in promoting awareness of early childhood as an issue, and in providing the basis for program development, was highlighted by a range of people interviewed in the course of the evaluation. Of particular importance to the regions was the 2015 *How are Vermont's Young Children and Families?* publication, which for the first time outlined a range of

indicators relating to early care, health, education and other relevant demographics for each of the 12 regions. This data, it was noted, helped raise awareness of the particular challenges each region faced. Vermont Insights is working closely with the BBF Regional Coordinators to develop a BBF Regional Action Plan community profile to support their regional systems-building work.

## Facilitating Factors at the State Level

These developments at the state and regional levels have been facilitated by the development of an organizational infrastructure for BBF, which has been resourced by the ELC - RTT grant. Since July 2014, BBF has grown from a staff of one (the Executive Director with part-time administrative support) to an organization with more than 18 staff members, including the BBF Regional Coordinators, a Regions Manager, a State Action Plan Coordinator, Communications and Finance Managers, and administrative support. It has also included the establishment of Vermont Insights.

At a broader level, those interviewed have pointed to other important developments that have helped put early childhood issues on the policy and political agenda, which should contribute to the goals of BBF. These have included the work of a range of organizations that have successfully engaged in areas of work in which BBF, as a 501 (c) (3), may be constrained (lobbying and direct political action for example). This work, it has been noted, supports BBF's goals of prioritizing early childhood issues and institutionalizing best practice at state and regional levels.

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1. Other papers have focused on behavioral health integration in pediatric primary care settings, Vermont's new universal prekindergarten law, the case for evidence-based child and family practices in Vermont, and the adverse effects of toxic stress in early childhood.
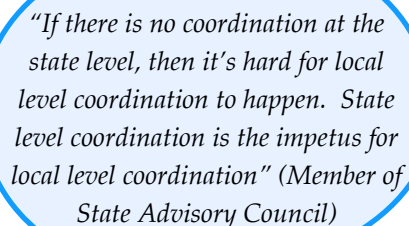
# Challenges

Not surprisingly, persons interviewed for the evaluation cited a range of challenges for BBF in establishing itself as a backbone organization.

In particular:

- **Building Relationships**. Managing any large-scale collective impact process presents challenges, not least the inevitable relationship issues that arise from seeking to collaborate across organizations, across sectors and, in the case of BBF, between stakeholders operating at local and state levels. This can raise challenges relating to trust, competition, and fear that a person's or organization's role may be infringed or diminished through the action of others.

    *"If there is no coordination at the state level, then it's hard for local level coordination to happen. State level coordination is the impetus for local level coordination" (Member of State Advisory Council)*

    On the one hand, BBF has been able to build on what people have described as a "culture of collaboration" in Vermont and on state and regional structures for collaborating on early childhood issues that endured, in at least some form, after funding was cut in the late 2000's. On the other hand, the cut in funding and decline in BBF structures is widely viewed as having engendered distrust in BBF among some key stakeholders, particularly at regional level. This has had a negative impact on the relationships upon which collaboration depends. Dealing with this legacy has been a challenge for at least some BBF Regional Coordinators, who, as noted earlier, have described relationship building (or rebuilding) as one of the important and necessary achievements of BBF over the past year.

- **Future Sustainability of BBF and its Impact on Early Childhood Systems-building**. One of the challenges in building BBF and for addressing past issues of distrust has been a concern about the sustainability of funding for BBF beyond the ELC-RTT grant. This was identified as a barrier to "buy-in" by some key stakeholders who may question the value of committing to a structure of collaboration that might not endure. This in turn raises a challenge for BBF in demonstrating the efficacy of an extensive collaboration approach in the relatively short period (for a collective impact process) of the grant period.

- **Obtaining "Buy-in" from Key Stakeholders at State Level**. Those interviewed consistently highlighted the important contribution of many state agency personnel. However, the precise role and scope of the decisions that representatives of the agencies were entitled to make on the BBF Regional Councils often seemed unclear and could be a barrier to quick decision making. Also, attendance and participation in BBF structures by some state agency personnel could be intermittent. Participation in some cases seemed to be based more on the personal commitment of many state personnel than on any organizational imperative to support the collaboration process. Addressing this challenge it was noted, required greater "buy-in" by state agency leadership at state level to the BBF collaborative process, including the development of policy and practice that would recognize and support the most effective participation of agency personnel at regional level.

- **Developing the Link between State and Regional Structures.** The link between regional and state level work and the development of a state level capacity to support the regional collaboration was often unclear to those working in the regions. In some cases the regions had identified lack of state level support

as a particular barrier to their work and urged a greater focus on building this capacity. However, there also seemed to be a lack of awareness of work that had been happening at state level – for example, the role of the BBF Executive Director in supporting the BBF SAC or the progress made in developing "Honeycombs."

- **Change in Leadership**. The BBF Executive Director has moved on to new things as of January 8, 2016. This presents a significant challenge for BBF, especially to ensure that there is consistency and stability in the structures that have and continue to be developed. Lack of stability in this respect, which did occur following funding cuts in the late 2000s, can be discouraging to effective collaboration, and could adversely affect the relationships and trust that has so far been developed.

- **Tensions relating to system building versus Direct Services.** One of the challenges and tensions that have existed around the development of BBF has been the view that a system building approach has been drawing resources away from services that could address needs more quickly and directly. This tension can be compounded if collaboration seems unduly focused on "process" and where the potential and value of a systems building approach is not demonstrated in a very practical way.

  BBF Regional Coordinators and BBF Regional Council members have described some success in bringing direct service providers onto the BBF Regional Council where the value of collaboration has been more apparent and the tensions on this issue reduced. However, the BBF Regional Coordinators have also noted the importance of not detaching BBF from direct services, as providing a service or developing and funding a program to meet a particular need, has been an important way for BBF to establish its credibility at local level. Providing a service, as noted earlier, can also be an effective means of testing the scale or dimensions of a need and what components are necessary to meet it in the most comprehensive way possible. It should not therefore be a question of system

building versus direct service provision for BBF, but rather how direct service provision can support systemic change.

The "Direct Service Grant" that BBF provides to the regions was mentioned as a potentially important resource in this respect, by providing a fund through which the BBF Regional Coordinators and BBF Regional Councils can target services in a way that contributes to broader systemic change.

- **Resistance to More "Planning" and Planning Methods.** Linked to the tensions around systems building versus service provision has been a resistance to what some people have believed to be too much process and planning. There has also been some confusion about the application of different methodologies, including the use of Theory of Change for the preparation of regional plans when there had been agreement already and a mandate to use Results-based Accountability. On the other hand, strong views were expressed by some that there was a need for more "ground-up" planning that reflected regional needs and priorities in a way that was not reflected in the State Early Childhood Action Plan which was considered more "top-down". A key challenge for BBF therefore, is to demonstrate the efficacy of the regional planning activities undertaken in leading to actionable plans that reflect local needs while at the same time linking these to result areas of the Action Plan.

- **Barriers to Data Availability.** Data gathered by Vermont Insights depends on the willingness and capacity of other organizations to share data. Data barriers at a local level identified by BBF have included issues around confidentiality in working with small local populations, and the fact that local data may not be collected in a standard way across all regions of the state and therefore comparisons can be difficult. Other issues identified include the fact that BBF regions are not completely contiguous with other jurisdictional regions for which various agencies collect data.

# 5. Recommendations

In conclusion ActKnowledge makes several recommendations to help BBF address some of its key challenges and to build on its successes to date.

1. **Remain committed to the outcomes BBF needs to achieve as a backbone organization.**

A clear lesson from the research on collective impact, and from BBF's own experience, is that collaboration will falter or even collapse without the backbone structure and organization necessary to support it. We recommend that BBF maintain an explicit commitment to progressing toward the outcomes laid out in its Theory of Change. Of particular importance is building BBF so that the intersection of its state and regional infrastructure drives coordination across agencies and sectors.

**2. Continue to develop and clarify the links between state and regional level early childhood structures.**

This is a fundamental part of the BBF model. BBF should continue to strengthen the links between the regions, and between the state and the regions, so that service delivery can be better integrated to serve young children and families.  Also, BBF should work to ensure these links are clear at the regional and state levels.

**3. New leadership should build on structures developed while adding their own ideas.**

Successful collective impact requires stable and consistent structures to support collaboration. This has been demonstrated in the context of BBF, where previous cuts in funding led to a decline in collaboration and to some distrust in BBF, including distrust in its capacity to sustain collaborative effort.

A great deal of thought, trial and error, and learning have gone into building a structure strong enough to sustain this collective impact initiative through staff changes, contextual changes and policy shifts. While fresh ideas and creative solutions have their place, it is important for incoming leadership to understand and support the continued functioning of this collective impact structure to build trust in the stability and consistency of BBF.  The new leadership is encouraged to keep the core components of the infrastructure in place, including the resourcing of BBF Regional Coordinators.

**4. Continue building relationships and trust.**

Building the human relationships that are at the heart of successful collaboration is an essential role of successful backbone institutions.  BBF has recognized this and one of the most consistent findings from the evaluation has been the progress made in building trust and relationships, including rebuilding relationships with people who for various reasons had been very critical of BBF. This has required a very intentional approach by BBF, especially the BBF Regional Coordinators, in dealing with criticism head on and in the most constructive way possible. *It is recommended* that this focus on relationships building continue, the need for which will become even greater as the intensity and extent of collaboration increases.

5. **Institutionalize linkages and relationships through supportive policy and practice.**

By building on increased trust, we recommend BBF look toward ensuring these new and stronger relationships become institutionalized, or the work will not be sustainable after the grant period. For example, this could include the development of policy and practice at state level that would recognize and support the most effective participation of agency personnel at regional level.

6. **Document and share accomplishments that demonstrate the value of the BBF model.**

It takes time for a systems building collective impact approach like BBF to deliver the ambitious results for children and families that have been identified in Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan and which have been further elaborated by each region. In building this system it is recommended that effort be made to identify particular examples of synergies between regional and state level collaboration to demonstrate the efficacy of the BBF model as illustrated in the BBF Theory of Change.

7. **Improve data collection and sharing efforts so that policy-makers can make decisions informed by data.**

Data has consistently been identified as an essential facilitating factor in both identifying the needs of children and families and for reviewing progress in meeting these needs. It is recommended that efforts continue to be made to facilitate sharing and capacity-building to ensure that a comprehensive information system is in place that allows comparison across regions.

8. **Undertake evaluations over 18 month periods to test achievement of outcomes in the BBF Theory of Change.**

The Theory of Change provides a framework for further evaluation by generating the evaluation questions that BBF needs to ask at particular points in time to verify whether the initiative remains on track. It is recommended that evaluation be conducted over 18 month periods and that this be linked to the outcomes in the Theory of Change.



Route 7

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## Images

Addison School Children (no date). Collection of the Henry Sheldon Museum.

Children having snowball fight in front of their home in Woodstock, Vermont.
Wolcott, Marion Post, March 1940. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000033749/PP/

Coolidge Home. Robbins, Frederick. Etching, circa 1940. Harold G. Rugg Collection, Vermont Historical Society.

Cuttingsville School students and teachers 1912. Historic Postcards of Cuttingsville, Vermont. Shrewsbury Historical Society. http://shrewsburyhistoricalsociety.com/flash/SHS_Postcards.02.html

Farmer's son and collie dog driving the cows back to the barn after watering them at the brook. All other sources of water supply were frozen for two months during very severe winter. Clinton Gilbert's farm. Woodstock, Vermont March 1940.

Wolcott, Marion Post, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Photograph Collection.Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000033679/PP/

Gathering hay near Brandon, Vermont.

Delano, Jack. August 1941. U.S. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black & White Photographs. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000027043/PP/

Highway signs, Rutland, Vermont.

Lee, Russell. October 1939. U.S. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black & White Photographs. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000015597/PP/

Proctorsville School Class. No date. Vermont Collection at Middlebury College.

Road to South Shaftsbury.

Lankes, Julius John. Linoleum cut, 1924. Harold G. Rugg Collection, Vermont Historical Society.

Route 7.

Lucioni, Luigi. Etching 1946. Harold G. Rugg Collection, Vermont Historical Society.

Snow scene, Windsor County, New Hampshire [i.e. Vermont]

Rothstein, Arthur. February 1936. U.S. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black & White Photographs. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998017949/PP/

West Hartford, Vermont, on White River.

Wolcott, Marion Post. March 1940. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Photograph Collection. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000033494/PP/



Gathering hay near Brandon, 1941

# Glossary

## Backbone Organization (from Stanford Social Innovation Review)

A backbone organization provides centralized infrastructure, dedicated staff and leadership, and a structured process for pursuing a collective impact initiative. Backbone organizations can organize cross-sector groups of partners to transform an often inefficient, fragmented system.

## Collective Impact (from Stanford Social Review)

The commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Unlike most collaborations, collective impact initiatives involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants.

## Indicator (from Harvard Family Research Project and www.theoryofchange.org)

An indicator provides evidence that a certain condition exists or certain results have or have not been achieved. Indicators enable decision-makers to assess progress towards the achievement of intended outputs, outcomes, goals, and objectives. As such, indicators are an integral part of a Results-based Accountability system (RBA).

## Outcome/Result

A desired change in a population, such as "children are healthy," which—among other outcomes—is thought necessary to be in place for a program or initiative to reach its goal. Outcomes generally refer to conditions that are needed but are not yet in place.

## Precondition

Any outcome that needs to occur before the final Outcome or Result can be achieved. For example, "children attend school" is a likely precondition to "high graduation rates" or "good academic performance."

## Results-Based Accountability (Excerpted from RBA homepage definition)

Results-Based Accountability™ (RBA), also known as Outcomes-Based Accountability™ (OBA), is a disciplined way of thinking and taking action that communities can use to improve the lives of children, youth, families, adults and the community as a whole. RBA is also used by organizations to improve the performance of their programs or services. Developed by Mark Friedman and described in his book *Trying Hard is Not Good Enough*, RBA uses a data-driven, decision-making process to help communities and organizations get beyond talking about problems to taking action to solve problems. RBA starts with ends and works backward, towards means. The "end" or difference you are trying to make looks slightly different if you are working on a broad community level or are focusing on your specific program or organization.

## Target

The percentage or number within a population, or subgroup (e.g., all third-graders), that can realistically be expected to change with respect to a given outcome or precondition given the resources available and other practical limitations). If the population reaches the target then the outcome is fulfilled.

## Theory of Change (from www.theoryofchange.org)

Theory of Change explains the process of change by outlining causal linkages in an initiative, i.e., the chronological and logical sequence of outcomes from early to long-term. The identified outcomes are modeled graphically showing each outcome in logical relationship to all the others. The links between outcomes are explained by "rationales" or statements of why one outcome is thought to be a prerequisite to another.

## Turning the Curve (from The Results-Based Accountability Guide)

What it will take to reach the result desired.



Addison School Children

# Appendix A
# Conceptual Approach and Methodology

This appendix presents:

1. First, an overview of the conceptual approach and associated process of designing a five year evaluation framework. It also suggests next steps for building this framework for guiding planning and evaluation.

2. Second, it outlines the methods of identifying early results, including key stakeholders consulted.

## 1. Design of Evaluation Framework and Next Steps

### Conceptual Approach to Evaluation

The State of Vermont had already adopted Results-Based Accountability (RBA) as a way to shift from the normal practice of reporting on what people do to reporting on whether the population improves as a result of the program activities. RBA focuses on identifying the key results you want, and what evidence would show it has been achieved.

However, with many players collaborating to achieve the results (Collective Impact), it is essential to lay out who must do what, and when. Any one organization may not be able to do its work effectively until others have done their parts to bring certain conditions into place; otherwise, the organization's work will be less effective and morale may decrease across the initiative. In

response to the particular challenges of a collective impact initiative, BBF sought out ActKnowledge, who are the developers and leading practitioners of a conceptual framework called "Theory of Change" (ToC). Theory of Change complements RBA by answering, in a structured way, the question frequently posed by RBA: "What does it takes to achieve the stated result?" Theory of Change maps out outcome pathways that pinpoint all the cause-and-effect linkages between program activities and the changed conditions needed to reach the desired results. The Theory of Change for this project is presented in the body of the report.

Each approach — ToC and RBA — provides connected frameworks and methods for planning and for measuring the progress of the collective impact that BBF is seeking to achieve in Vermont. Frameworks and methods for effective planning and evaluation are clearly crucial to successful collective impact. Significant efforts in Vermont, including legislation stipulating the use of RBA, bring population-level results into greater focus to inform policy, planning and review.

Equally significant in a collective impact context is the power of the graphically depicted causal outcomes pathway to plot 1) the pathways pursued by the collaborating state, local, and non-profit parties and how they interconnect; and 2) to plot all the points in time at which BBF needs to influence the behavior of other actors in the arena—including its collaborators—to bring about the needed changes in conditions all along the way.

## The Process of Designing a Model for Evaluation

ActKnowledge convened several workshops with BBF staff to take the six results identified from the Vermont Early Childhood Action Plan to identify what was needed to get the named result. ActKnowledge did not ask the group to talk about activities, but rather about the results needed for the entire population.
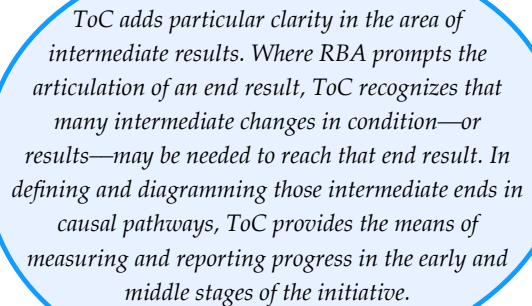
For example, to reach the ultimate result of "Vermont is the best place to raise a child," participants observed that children needed to be physically and mentally healthy, their families needed to be able to access supports, and so on. In turn, being healthy and accessing support is not automatic: other conditions must be achieved so that children and families have access to health care and to services.

ActKnowledge held several group meetings with BBF leadership and BBF Regional Coordinators to get their views on what role they would need to play to support stakeholders in staying on a track toward producing the conditions that lead to results. ActKnowledge then had a technical assistance team visit each region (some several times) to help them add to the model and contextualize for their locales.

Finally, ActKnowledge interviewed 25 people who were willing to discuss their views of what it would take to achieve success to support the early childhood system in Vermont. These included BBF Regional Coordinators, BBF Regional Council members and State Advisory Committee members. (For confidentiality reasons, the names of individuals interviewed are not listed in this report.)

The result of this part of the process was a full Theory of Change for BBF that specifies results for full accountability. The main result areas were ratified by BBF central office and the BBF Regional Coordinators in April 2015.

The next step in the development of the Statewide Theory of Change is to work with the BBF SAC and

*ToC adds particular clarity in the area of intermediate results. Where RBA prompts the articulation of an end result, ToC recognizes that many intermediate changes in condition—or results—may be needed to reach that end result. In defining and diagramming those intermediate ends in causal pathways, ToC provides the means of measuring and reporting progress in the early and middle stages of the initiative.*

a broader group of legislators, providers and constituents to review the model developed and identify any changes they feel are needed. BBF Regional Councils are also continuing to develop regional Theories of Change to inform Regional Action Plans that are relevant to local conditions. BBF's role as a backbone organization is to make sure that the Statewide and Regional Theories of Change are closely aligned.

## Conclusion and Future Steps on Evaluation Design

As noted above, more input and buy-in will ensure no steps and conditions are missed.

Therefore we propose the following evaluation steps for next year:

1) Increased input and vetting.

2) Regional ToCs that directly inform Regional Action Plans and are in alignment with Vermont's Early Childhood Action Plan.

3) Identification of indicators (per RBA) and targets that are reasonably within reach for the next evaluation, which we propose be conducted at the grant mid-point.

4) Continued tracking of progress at every level of the model. If outcomes are on track BBF wants to understand how well the work is going. If the work is falling short then the role of evaluation is to learn why and provide information to inform course-correction decisions.

# 2. Methods Used in Identifying Early Findings

The funding for the first phase was intended for the evaluation design described above. However, as ActKnowledge built the model (ToC for Early Childhood System) we found that some early outcomes were well under way. ActKnowledge took the opportunity to test the validity and thoroughness of the design through the methods listed below which elicited a number of early findings.

## Data Collection Methods

1) Thorough review of the Action Plan and extraction of the six key results areas to begin a process of operationalizing the Plan and creating local plans that would be narrower in focus, but aligned with the Action Plan.

2) Review of any previous mission statements, evaluations or local Strategic Plans to ground the new design in what had been done to date and add the necessary components to be a backbone institution.

3) Attend multiple multi-day peer learning workshops with BBF Regional Coordinators to get their input and listen to their issues.

4) Hold multi-day workshops with BBF leadership to interview and discuss their roles, the progress they have made and their challenges.

5) Obtain input at the April 2015 presentation and ratification by BBF Regional Coordinators of the main result areas of the Theory of Change. Feedback at that session was an important data collection opportunity.

6) Visits to every region by a technical assistance team who supported the BBF Regional Coordinators and BBF Regional Councils in developing Theories of Change and in reaching agreement on common goals across all 12 regions. ActKnowledge evaluators were able to interview these technical assistance/capacity builders, who had spent so much time "on the ground," on their views of the model and the progress and challenges in each region.

7) Interviews held in Vermont with all BBF Regional Coordinators.

8) Interviews with other state or key stakeholders, or BBF Regional Council members who had responded to requests for interviews.

9) In total, over 60 hours of interviews were conducted and transcribed from the audio recordings, not including in person-days spent with BBF leadership.

## Evaluation Next Steps

1) Work with BBF and regions on aligning their achievements, their work plans and their ToCs.

2) ActKnowledge has designed a performance-monitoring reporting form that is results-based, which will be implemented in early 2016.

3) An interim report in 18 months (June 2017) is recommended to assess whether the foundation laid here is producing results. This will allow evaluation resources to stretch further and provide enough time for the work in progress to show results.

4) Produce a final Results-Based report on whether and how targets indicators were met and how.

5) Describe a state-of-the-art approach to collective impact. This will be the first in the country.

# Appendix B
# Qualifications and Experience

ActKnowledge is a social enterprise that connects social change practice with rigorous study of how and why initiatives work. Based within a research center at a large public university—the Center for Human Environments at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York—we benefit from our interactions with faculty and graduate students. Recognized as leaders in the development, training, and practice of the Theory of Change (ToC) methodology, we have used ToC as a foundation for organizational capacity building, clarifying goals, evaluation and organizational change. ActKnowledge has maintained the website theoryofchange.org for over ten years, providing resources on the uses and practice of Theory of Change to the field free of charge. More recently ActKnowledge has created the Center for Theory of Change to promote and disseminate standards for Theory of Change as an approach to visioning, strategic planning and evaluation. Beginning with a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, ActKnowledge has developed and maintained software, **Theory of Change Online (TOCO)**, for the field to support social change practitioners in developing their own Theories of Change.

In operation fifteen years, ActKnowledge has a large evaluation repertory in various areas including after-school enrichment and community school programs, community development, advocacy and coalition-building, public health, urban public space, and international development. ActKnowledge has conducted hundreds of formative and summative evaluations using a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods to produce the soundest data and findings about outcomes. Our evaluations address questions of program implementation by engaging program staff and stakeholders to understand questions of context and constraint. Our work ranges from multinational studies to local non-profit evaluations. Data from these studies has been used to make strategic decisions about country-level policy, international policies and practices, grant making, and programmatic change.

Since our initial Community Schools evaluation work begin in 1999 with The Children's Aid Society, ActKnowledge has become a leader in youth development evaluation. We are currently evaluating a number of youth development initiatives including:

- Hartford (Conn.) Community Schools since 2012
- Paterson (N.J.) Public Schools – Full Service Community Schools since 2012
- The Children's Aid Society 21st Century Community Learning Centers and their role in Community Schools, since 2000
- New York City Community Learning Schools, an initiative led by the United Federation of Teachers in 26 schools in the New York City school district, beginning in 2015.
- Fiver Children's Foundation, which operates a year-round youth development program for New York City youth.
- Queens Community House
- Lower Hudson Valley Perinatal Network

ActKnowledge worked with the **Transforming Health Systems** team at the **Rockefeller Foundation** to clarify the goals of this multi-national program to advance access and equitable health outcomes through health systems reform. ActKnowledge also helped Rockefeller with a Theory of Change relating to advancing ocean health through support for small-scale fisheries in costal areas of developing countries.

ActKnowledge and **Oxfam Australia** developed a joint working paper on theories of change to support young people to make change happen. The work was undertaken as a strategic input into the planning and change process for the Oxfam International Youth Partnerships. It was supported by the Development Leadership Program.

ActKnowledge worked with **The Hunger Project** to develop a Theory of Change-based monitoring and evaluation system for the Project's antipoverty work globally and for specific program in several African countries, India, Mexico and Bangladesh.

Other clients include:

- Action Aid
- Alliance for Financial Inclusion
- American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Brooklyn Community Foundation
- City Harvest
- Enterprise Community Partners
- Gill Foundation
- Helmsley Charitable Trust
- Inclusion Ireland

- Lumina Foundation for Education
- New Destiny Housing Corporation
- ORBIS
- Quebec Community Learning Centres
- The California Endowment
- The Trust for Public Land
- Trickle Up
- UNICEF USA
- Women for Women International

Two of the lead staff, Eoin Collins and Heléne Clark recently published a chapter on using Theory of Change in Community School evaluations, and Heléne Clark authored a previous chapter on Community School evaluation in Dryfoos & Quinn (2005).

Eoin Collins has been an economist, evaluator and social policy advocate for more than 20 years. From November 2011 he has been a senior evaluation specialist in ActKnowledge, a New York based research and evaluation organization that has developed Theory of Change, an internationally recognized strategic planning and evaluation process and tool.

From 2005 he was Director of Policy Change in GLEN, a national NGO funded by the Irish Government and the Atlantic Philanthropies, a major US philanthropic organization. He is also a non-Executive Director of SPEAK Ltd, a consultancy that has developed a participatory evaluation and management support methodology and associated set of tools.

Prior to 2005, he was a Director of Nexus Research, a Dublin based research and evaluation consultancy, where he developed extensive expertise in research and evaluation across a range of areas including access to the labour market, employment support and social inclusion. Clients have included the Irish Government, the Commission of the European Communities, Irish State Agencies and NGO's.

Eoin's current work focuses on youth development, human rights and international development. He is an expert in Theory of Change and RBA methodologies.

Heléne Clark is the founder and director of ActKnowledge. Dr. Clark has been the lead evaluator on numerous initiatives and served as advisor to many other evaluations around the U.S. and in the United Kingdom. Dr. Clark incorporated the Theory of Change approach into ActKnowledge's work and has led ActKnowledge to be the pre-eminent developer, facilitator and trainer in this method.

In the course of helping a community development group in Brooklyn sometime in the 1980s, Heléne devised a simple outcomes mapping technique to help the group base its plans on a clear idea what it wanted to achieve. We like to think that Theory of Change emerged in her head at that time even as others were beginning to develop the idea of theory-driven evaluation in the context of comprehensive community initiatives.

Heléne has led Theory of Change-based strategic planning for Women for Women International, The Children's Aid Society, The Rockefeller Foundation, Helmsley Charitable Trust, The Hunger Project, and many others. Heléne has also presented RBA training with ToC.

Dr. Clark was the lead evaluator for a project in Russia to develop an affordable housing CBO in Russia before there were CBOs or a non-profit sector, to develop the first affordable housing organization in Moscow, which still exists.

As Associate Director of the Housing Environments Research Group from 1985 through 1998 Heléne worked extensively on affordable housing policy issues, working with tenant groups, tenant networks, and groups trying to deal with crisis and recovery. Since 1997 she has served as Chair of the Board of Housing Conservation Coordinators, which is responsible for affordable housing in the Clinton-Hell's Kitchen neighborhood on the West Side of Manhattan which faces the effects of gentrification and massive urban redevelopment.

After stepping down as associate director, Heléne and a colleague founded ActKnowledge to bring systematic research and analytic rigor to problems of action planning and organizational learning in the non-profit sector. They formed ActKnowledge as social enterprise to align with the emerging field of social enterprise in which revenues are used only for operating costs and development of the field.

Dana Taplin, a longtime colleague of Dr. Clark's, joined ActKnowledge in 2006 to develop a practice in public space planning and expand ActKnowledge's Theory of Change practice.

Dana developed the conceptual and practical applications of Theory of Change as both a planning and evaluation method. He is skilled in Theory of Change graphic representations and is directing the development of graphic capabilities in ActKnowledge's Theory of Change Online software.

Dr. Taplin played a key role in developing theories of change for programs at The Rockefeller Foundation, Enterprise Community Partners, the Gill Foundation, The Hunger Project, and other ActKnowledge clients and partners.

Dr. Taplin's research interest is in parks and other public community spaces as human environments. He collaborated with anthropologists in a cultural use study of three New York State parks for the Open Space Institute, and has conducted ethnographic studies of park resources for the National Park Service at Gateway National Recreation Area and Fire Island National Seashore. Dana's dissertation study on Prospect Park, Brooklyn, illuminates differences among park visitor constituencies in response to a conservancy-led park regeneration strategy that prioritized historic preservation and ecological restoration.

Coolidge Home