strengthening
the foundation

STRATEGIC EVIDENCE BUILDING FOR TWO-GENERATION APPROACHES

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.

introduction

The past several years have seen a significant resurgence of interest in two-generation approaches as viable interventions for interrupting the intergenerational cycle of poverty and promoting opportunities and successful outcomes for both parents and their children. The field has grown and learned much from the early ventures into two-generation approaches, yet many key questions vital to the success of these approaches remain unanswered. Public and private funders can play an important role in strengthening the evidence base for these approaches by strategically investing in research and evaluation.

This brief was developed as a resource primarily for private and public funders to support strategic evidence building for two-generation approaches by:

- *summarizing insights from early and current two-generation approaches;*
- *examining what evidence is needed to further demonstrate the value of two-generation approaches; and*
- *offering a set of funding priorities and recommendations.*

This brief can serve as a starting point for funders to have conversations — among their own staff, leadership and external partners — about how their work already contributes to the knowledge about what works, and places where further contributions can be made.

Two-generation approaches to reducing poverty are based on systems, policies and programs that are designed to simultaneously meet the needs of parents and their children via a well-aligned set of purposeful interventions.[1,2] These approaches are grounded in a long history of research findings that indicate that the challenges, successes and well-being of children and their parents are interrelated. Studies have shown that children are adversely affected when their parents experience economic hardship, and, conversely, parents' ability to succeed in their educational and workforce pursuits is often contingent upon access to supports for their children.[3]

The renewed interest in two-generation approaches is prompted by the complex network of challenges faced by families experiencing intergenerational poverty and the enduring negative consequences for both parents and their children. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is among various organizations in the public, nonprofit and private sectors that view two-generation approaches as viable interventions for interrupting the intergenerational cycle of poverty and mitigating challenges that these families face. Evidence has also emerged indicating that two-generation approaches produce positive outcomes for parents, children and families as a whole.[4] Building evidence supported by rigorous research and evaluation is particularly important to decision makers responsible for the investment of resources in interventions that could affect these outcomes and improve individual and family well-being. This brief summarizes insights from early and current two-generation approaches, examines what evidence is needed to further demonstrate the value of two-generation approaches and offers strategies funders can employ to help strengthen the evidence base.

insights

From Early and Current Two-Generation Approaches

Two-generation approaches of the 1980s and early 1990s were designed to provide services for both children and parents by embedding programs for parents in early childhood programs, or by adding child care programs to education or employment programs for parents. Enthusiasm about these approaches, dubbed "Two-Generation 1.0," declined in the late 1990s due to disappointing evaluation results that did not consistently show positive effects on children's development or on parents' level of education, skills, employment or income.[5] Analyses of various Two-Generation 1.0 program evaluations revealed implementation flaws such as poor-quality early-education programs for children, programs for parents that were limited in scope and intensity, and disjointed services that failed to address the needs of children and parents equally or simultaneously.[6]

Recent years have seen a new wave of anti-poverty approaches, referred to as "Two-Generation 2.0."[7] Although Two-Generation 2.0 approaches vary in structure, content, target populations and platforms, their common focus is on providing access to services and supports for both generations within the same program,[8] typically in the following service areas:

- postsecondary education
- workforce development
- asset building
- income supports for parents
- education and developmental supports for children or youth

The combination of educational, employment and family support services is anticipated to result in improved outcomes for parents (e.g., strengthened parenting skills and increased social capital), children (e.g., increased social-emotional competence) and the family as a whole (e.g., greater economic stability and expanded life opportunities).[9] Two-Generation 2.0 approaches are grounded in research findings or research-informed theory, as well as four key insights from earlier efforts regarding quality, scope, intensity and integration of the design and delivery of services to parents and their children.

First, many Two-Generation 1.0 early childhood education programs were deemed to be of questionable quality.[10] Similarly, there was no standard of rigor in the content or quality of instructional methods in adult education programs. Two-Generation 2.0 approaches seek to provide educational experiences for children and youth that meet high-quality standards and have demonstrated effectiveness. Decades of research have demonstrated the immediate and long-term positive effects of high-quality education on children's developmental, academic and behavioral outcomes.[11] Ensuring high-quality parent education and training is also a goal of Two-Generation 2.0 approaches.[12]

Second, Two-Generation 1.0 programs focused on basic education, GED attainment and minimal job training for adults. These efforts often resulted in low-wage jobs that were not sufficient to help families move up the economic

EVIDENCE DEFINED

For the purposes of this brief, evidence *is defined as the body of data and information that supports or refutes the validity of an idea, hypothesis or approach. Strong evidence emerges from high-quality quantitative and qualitative research methods and can be used to determine the* effectiveness *(i.e., whether desired results were achieved) or* impact *(i.e., whether long-term, sustained change was achieved) of an approach.*

ladder.[13] For example, a re-analysis of National Longitudinal Study of Youth data did not reveal evidence of higher earnings or higher earnings growth for GED recipients, whereas college enrollment was linked to substantial returns.[14] It has been reported that by 2020, more than 60 percent of jobs will require some type of postsecondary training or credential.[15] Two-Generation 2.0 approaches extend the adult education component to include postsecondary education and training that leads to certification or to a two- or four-year degree; this extension helps parents develop marketable skills that will prepare them for family-supporting employment and opportunities for career advancement.[16]

Third, reviews of various Two-Generation 1.0 approaches found that the frequency and duration of child-focused and parent-focused service provisions were not sufficient to be effective.[17] Thus, Two-Generation 2.0 approaches place a high priority on the intensity and dosage of services provided.[18]

Fourth, although Two-Generation 1.0 approaches provided programming for both parents and their children, services for one generation typically were provided independently of, or isolated from, services for the other generation.[19] Two-Generation 2.0 approaches are designed to provide a seamless integration across intergenerational service areas. Integrating services and supports for parents and children in the same program in a streamlined manner helps to mitigate or remove some of the barriers to participation in a two-generation program, such as having to use public transportation to access services at multiple sites.[20] This "no wrong door" approach for parents and children also helps to enhance the coordination of services between generations.[21] In addition, integrated service delivery is thought to produce multiplier effects, so that the successes of parents, children and the family build on and support each other.[22] For example, Sommer and colleagues found that mothers who observe their children's growth and development in an early childhood education program may be more motivated to pursue additional education and training for themselves, which can lead to better employment.[23] Likewise, as parents' economic mobility, self-efficacy and social support increase and the stressors in their lives decrease, they may be more capable of supporting their children's intellectual, language and social-emotional development.[24]

Several Two-Generation 2.0 approaches are regarded as promising in that they articulate a theory of change based on research-informed thinking, but they do not yet have ample empirical data to determine their effectiveness or impact. However, several poverty-reduction experts assert that the theoretical foundation for promising Two-Generation 2.0 approaches is sound, the early results are encouraging and well-suited to further evidence building.[25] Consequently, practitioners, evaluators, researchers and policymakers have made a strong push for compelling evidence in the two-generation field. The following sections describe the existing evidence for two-generation approaches, address the challenges to expanding the evidence base and offer priorities and recommendations to funders that may serve as a catalyst for the development of a more robust and rigorous evidence base.

the current

Two-Generation Evidence Base

There is a growing Two-Generation 2.0 evidence base resulting from primary quantitative and qualitative data collection and secondary data analyses, including implementation studies, descriptive studies, qualitative interviews, program observations, administrative data analyses and emerging experimental and quasi-experimental designs. These early findings have informed program modifications and have identified some benefits of using a two-generation approach to address the needs of parents and children experiencing poverty. Examples of relevant findings follow.

Mason (2016) conducted an independent evaluation of 20 Barbara Bush Foundation Family Literacy Programs across the country.[26] These intensive literacy education programs engaged over 700 families of young children, 72 percent of whom had an annual income of $20,000 or less. Parents and their children were required to take classes two to four days a week in the same school. Adults participated in reading, math and parenting skills classes — as well as English-language skills development for non-native speakers — while their children participated in experiences designed to build early literacy and communication skills. Evaluation results indicated significant, positive educational outcomes for both parents (improved basic education skills) and children (improved receptive and expressive language skills).

The effect of combining job training specific to local labor market needs (i.e., sector based) with high-quality early childhood education is being tested as a viable two-generation approach to workforce development for adults with low-level skills.[27] For example, a random assignment evaluation of sectoral training programs revealed positive results for adult participants and their young children, as well as employers.[28] The training programs integrated technical training in job readiness and basic skills, case management, supportive services and job placement assistance. Results showed that in some programs participants earned 18 percent more, were more likely to be employed and worked significantly more hours than participants in the comparison group. Results of the evaluation also reinforced findings from earlier studies about benefits to employers from partnerships with training programs, such as a reduction in employee turnover. A high-quality Head Start program, in which parents of enrolled children received sector-based job training through the program, showed similar positive results.[29] This two-generation program also increased children's Head Start attendance and reduced chronic absenteeism.

An outcomes study of a two-generation program that focused on building mothers' and children's human capital through the provision of safe and affordable housing, quality early childhood education, life skills training and support for career-track education revealed several successful outcomes. A significant number of single mothers enrolled in the program earned associate's or bachelor's degrees and were able to secure stable employment with livable wages. In addition, 93 percent of the mothers' children tended to perform at or above grade level. A survey of alumnae of the program provided some evidence of the long-term impact of a two-generation approach: The majority of mothers had moved from below the federal poverty level and reported a decrease in income from public assistance, and 81 percent of their children performed at or above grade level in elementary and high school.[30]

Another study yielded mixed results from a rigorous random assignment design that compared outcomes for parents who received service enhancements within their child's early care program with outcomes for parents who had to access alternative services in their community. Among the full study sample of parents who received service enhancements, there were no significant impacts on measures of employment, earnings, job characteristics or income. However, when parents were disaggregated by age of the child, parents with infants who received service enhancements experienced positive impacts on parental employment and wages at a higher rate than parents with toddlers who received service enhancements, as well as parents who did not receive the additional services.[31] These findings point to the need to understand factors that influence differential benefits to families, such as the age of the child.

Ongoing research has also strengthened the theoretical rationale for and highlighted the potential value of a Two-Generation 2.0 approach to working with families experiencing financial insecurity. Numerous studies provide support for the underlying premise of two-generation approaches — that is, that the experiences and outcomes of children and their families are inextricably linked. For example, Duncan, Magnuson, and Votruba-Drzal (2014) found that children who were ages 4 to 7 when their parent started an income-support program scored higher on achievement tests than children ages 4 to 7 whose parents did not start an income-support program.[32] Using secondary data sources, Hernandez and Napierala (2014) found substantial disparities in education and health outcomes of children and youth based on their mothers' level of education. Children and youth whose mothers had not graduated from high school experienced large disparities in reading and mathematics proficiency in eighth grade, on-time graduation from high school, birthweight and obesity as compared to children and youth whose mothers had higher levels of education.[33]

Two-Generation 2.0 approaches can benefit from new knowledge from a range of fields. Research on the negative effects of maternal mental health issues (e.g., depression, addiction, anxiety disorders and social isolation) on parenting and child development has been bolstered by advances in neuroscience that address the impact of toxic stress, trauma and adverse childhood experiences on children and families.[34] This has led some Two-Generation 2.0 approaches to include addressing maternal mental health, reducing stress and increasing executive functioning skills as critical program components.[35] In addition, the wealth of research that has demonstrated the reciprocal relationship between parents' and children's physical and mental health provides a strong rationale for two-generation programs that target both generations' mental and physical health problems.[36]

Daminger, Hayes, Barrows and Wright (2015) asserted that in order to permanently escape poverty, families must build multiple forms of capital.[37] Two-Generation 2.0 approaches commonly address financial capital (money, assets and resources) and human capital (education, skills and experiences). However, a growing trend within these approaches is to employ strategies that explicitly address social capital (interpersonal connections and relationships) and health capital (physical and mental well-being). Reports have contended that social capital can provide needed support, broaden opportunities that build economic security for families experiencing poverty and contribute to families' well-being.[38]

challenges

in Building a Two-Generation Evidence Base

The two-generation field faces several critical challenges that can inhibit the development of a strong evidence base. As Two-Generation 2.0 approaches are still evolving, it is important to acknowledge and address these challenges.

ACCOUNTING FOR COMPLEXITY

The intergenerational cycle of poverty is a complex social issue. Two-generation approaches that aim to address this problem vary in structure, content, target populations and platforms. A common goal of diverse two-generation approaches should be to provide simultaneous intergenerational services and resources to parents and children who are experiencing the complicated interplay of adversities brought about by poverty — adversities that are experienced differently by parents, children and whole families. Developing evaluation strategies that account for the necessary complexity of two-generation program designs, as well as the diversity of difficulties families face, is a major challenge.

DEFINITION UNCERTAINTY

Given the variety of Two-Generation 2.0 approaches, another challenge within the field is one of definition: Can a single, "one-size-fits-all" definition be reached that accounts for variation in approaches and contexts, or is a single definition even appropriate for this multifaceted field? Some organizations have defined a two-generation approach by delineating the key components of their particular approach.[39] Other organizations have put forth a broad working definition, such as, "two-generation approaches focus on creating opportunities for and addressing needs of both vulnerable parents and children together."[40] It is arguable that neither a single definition nor a single theory of change is needed or even possible for all contexts. What is clear, however, is that programs must have an explicit, research-informed theory of change, a logic model and a set of outcomes that fit their particular context in order to employ a sound evaluation plan and build strong evidence.

IDENTIFYING CORE OR COMMON SERVICE COMPONENTS

The literature contains frequent references to "core components" of Two-Generation 2.0 approaches — that is, key services and supports. However, the service components typically identified as "core" tend to be those that are most common to well-known approaches, such as job training and early childhood education. In addition to the lack of consensus about definition, there has not been agreement across the field about the core components of a two-generation approach — that is, those that are regarded as essential for the success of all two-generation programs.

IDENTIFYING COMMON OUTCOMES

Generally, two-generation anti-poverty approaches are designed to improve outcomes that prior studies have shown to be critical to breaking the cycle of poverty. These intergenerational outcomes are typically considered to be:

- increased parental educational attainment and employment;
- child school readiness and academic success; and
- family economic mobility and self-sufficiency.

However, specific short- and long-term outcomes for parents, children and whole families may vary based on the target populations, program content or service platform. Different two-generation approaches are customized to fit the needs of participants. As a result, child-focused, parent-focused and family-focused outcomes that have been explicitly targeted by specific programs are subject to high levels of variability.

IDENTIFYING FAMILY OUTCOME MEASURES

Some researchers have recommended determining individualized family outcomes and services within a program because one-size-fits-all outcome measures may not align with a family's actual needs.[41] This approach may be too flexible, presenting a challenge to maintaining fidelity to a particular program design, having common program measurements for all families and building a two-generation evidence base that answers what works and why.

MOVING FROM CORRELATIONAL TO CAUSAL EVIDENCE

A wealth of correlational research has shown the negative effect of poverty on child development, the immediate and long-term benefits of early education and early intervention for children, the relationship between children's mental and physical health and that of their parents and the intergenerational benefits of parents' educational level that persist over time.[42] The intricacies of intergenerational poverty suggest a complex causal pathway leading from economic hardship to economic stability. A major challenge in building the evidence base of Two-Generation 2.0 approaches is demonstrating causal relationships in order to draw conclusions about the differential impact of two-generation versus single-generation approaches.

PRACTICAL BARRIERS

Practical matters such as funding limitations and grant periods can inadvertently interfere with the rigor of an evaluation plan. For example, funding limitations may restrict evaluators from implementing a methodologically sound design for measuring long-term outcomes for children and parents. A grant period may only allow for the observation of short-term results, which could lead to a questionable conclusion about the intervention. Given the complexity of interrupting the intergenerational transmission of poverty, positive long-term results may take more time to emerge than allowed by the grant period.

Data issues can also present barriers to understanding the outcomes of two-generation programs. For example, service providers often do not use integrated data management systems to track events and milestones for program participants, both across service domains and across generations in individual families. While individual programs may use systems that cater to their respective needs, researchers, evaluators and policymakers stand to benefit from more standardized methods of reporting and data management. These stakeholders often encounter a dearth of harmonized data that can be used to better reveal broader trends and insights, which can limit the use of program and administrative data to gain a deep understanding of participant outcomes across approaches.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Numerous studies have found that there is a high probability for children who experience poverty to also experience poverty as adults.[43] Program design and evaluation should take into account the social and structural factors that enable poverty to be sustained from generation to generation, such as systemic racism (i.e., public policies, institutional practices and cultural representations that perpetuate racial and ethnic inequities), as well as the systemic barriers that often exist for families trying to transition out of poverty (e.g., the challenge of navigating complex agencies). Failing to do so would not only contribute to a lack of awareness of the acute adversities families face, but could also interfere with accurate understandings and interpretations of evaluation findings.

funding

Priorities for Building a Two-Generation Evidence Base

Advancing an evidence-building agenda will enhance understanding of effective two-generation approaches and their impacts on parents, children and family units. Previous two-generation efforts and evaluations of more recent two-generation programs currently underway have provided important insights about the viability of two-generation approaches in addressing intergenerational poverty. Rigorous evaluations can clarify what works, for whom, under what circumstances and why; confirm or refute promising approaches; establish causal relationships between two-generation program components and parent, child and family outcomes; and demonstrate whether two-generation approaches that jointly serve parents and their children are more effective than approaches that serve parents and children individually. The following funding priorities and questions are proposed to begin filling the knowledge gaps within the two-generation field. Funders interested in expanding the evidence base should keep these priorities in mind as they make decisions about allocating resources to the design, development, implementation and evaluation of two-generation programs.

FUNDING PRIORITY 1

Using Multiple Methods

Two-generation approaches vary in structure, content, target populations and service platforms. They also cross multiple disciplines, including economics, child and youth development, family theory and education. Due to the design complexity of Two-Generation 2.0 approaches, it is advisable to consider multidisciplinary knowledge and multisystem-level processes, as well as the use of mixed method designs, to build the evidence base as appropriate and feasible to the context. These include experimental and quasi-experimental designs, high-quality qualitative and quantitative methods, formative and summative evaluations, performance measures and analysis of program administrative data.

USING MULTIPLE METHODS: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Which research design and data gathering method(s) should be used to answer specific questions of interest?
- What qualitative and quantitative data can enrich our understanding of two-generation processes?

FUNDING PRIORITY 2

Testing Components

Reports of promising Two-Generation 2.0 approaches have shown some consistency with respect to program components. Typically, one or more of the following service areas are included: postsecondary education, workforce development, asset building, income supports for parents, mental and physical health, social capital, parenting skills education, crisis supports (e.g., food pantries or housing assistance), enhanced case management, and education and developmental supports for children. It is desirable to ultimately determine if these common components are also core components of essential pathways to desired parent, child and family outcomes. It is also important to establish what levels of quality, intensity, duration and service dose of program components are necessary to achieve desired outcomes. Systematically determining core, or at least common, components will provide a basis for creating, refining and measuring two-generation approaches across target populations and service platforms.

TESTING COMPONENTS: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How do the identified common components contribute to the effectiveness of two-generation approaches?
- What combination of common components result in the greatest program effects?
- What common components are core, or essential, to the achievement of program outcomes across target populations and service platforms?

FUNDING PRIORITY 3

Testing Additional Variables

Advances in neuroscience, developmental psychology and the behavioral and social sciences provide a strong rationale for testing additional variables such as experiences for trauma-exposed children, experiences that intentionally promote children's age-appropriate progress in executive function competence, experiences that strengthen parents' ability to reduce children's chronic stress and build child-coping skills, and experiences that build family protective factors. Rigorously testing additional variables is necessary to determine if there is empirical evidence to conclude that they contribute to the effectiveness of two-generation approaches.

TESTING ADDITIONAL VARIABLES: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What evidence is there that increased social capital (or another variable) causes measurable gains in family outcomes?
- What evidence is there that interventions can improve parent and child executive functioning?

FUNDING PRIORITY 4

Testing Integration Across Components

Generally, integration refers to the intentional, seamless and simultaneous delivery of services and supports for parents and their children both across service domains and across generations in a family. Integration is hypothesized to be the key to the synergistic effects of two-generation approaches.

TESTING INTEGRATION ACROSS COMPONENTS: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What is the best operational definition of integration that has relevance across service platforms?
- What processes and systems must be in place for intergenerational services and supports to be fully integrated (e.g., staff training, warm handoffs when making participant referrals)?
- In what ways does integration of services prove more effective than disparate programming for parents and children?

recommendations

to Help Strengthen the Two-Generation Evidence Base

As noted previously, a number of critical assumptions — both implicit and explicit — undergird two-generation approaches. These hypotheses require additional, rigorous testing. While far from an exhaustive list, the following are key recommendations that funders interested in strengthening the evidence base of the two-generation field should seek to address, either through grants for the evaluation of existing programs built on these assumptions, or through the design, development and eventual evaluation of new programs that deliberately put one or more of these assumptions into practice. Funders also have a critical role to play in future efforts that demonstrate the value of two-generation approaches to broad audiences, especially as the evidence base becomes more robust over time.

FUNDING IN FOCUS:
BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING PROGRAMS — KEYS TO DEGREES

What is Keys to Degrees? *Keys to Degrees is a campus-focused, two-generation program that provides living arrangements and other supports to parents and their children. Parents receive support as they pursue a traditional baccalaureate degree, and their children are enrolled in high-quality education programs.*

How has the Keys program become stronger over time? *The original Keys program at Endicott College continues to be adjusted as additional needs of participants are identified. This focus on participant needs has led to promising participant graduation rates. Recently, Keys has been replicated in multiple colleges.*

What could funders learn from Keys? *To successfully replicate the Keys model in different locations, new programs need funding to pay for staff, offer scholarships and deliver supportive services to student-parents. At the core of expanding the two-generation evidence base is the need to sustain the capacity of programs to deliver critical services. Funders could directly support two-generation efforts by flexibly investing in operational expenses, like staff time, or unique needs per program, such as housing procurement.*

RECOMMENDATION 1

Build and Strengthen Programs

Two-generation programs need to be strengthened, and perhaps grown, to be large enough to support rigorous evaluation. This is a challenge as programs must continue to thrive without a strong evidence base. Building and strengthening programs first entails establishing a clear conceptualization of the components, a logic model and/or theory of change, an adequate research design and enough time and funding for experimentation and observation. Second, it requires having enough variation to test and having a sufficient sample size for analyses.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Build Program Capacity for Evaluation

While carefully selecting appropriate research designs and time horizons can help to grow the evidence base, a lack of program readiness for evaluation can impose limitations on the extent of its growth. There are several ways funders can help more programs achieve readiness for the types of evaluations described in this brief, including the following:

Funding to assess a program's evaluation readiness. Since Two-Generation 2.0 approaches are still in the formative stage, a first step in an evidence-building agenda is to determine a program's evaluation readiness. The Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII) Approach to Evaluation offers one strategy. Although PII was developed to build an evidence base for child welfare policy and practice, the stages it describes could serve as an organizing framework for programs to be better prepared to evaluate their two-generation approaches. PII is a comprehensive evaluation strategy that guides the development of a rigorous evaluation plan from pre-evaluation activities (e.g., reviewing existing research evidence and articulating a theory of change) to full-change evaluation implementation (e.g., conducting formative and summative evaluations).[44] Regardless of which specific approach is used, as more individual two-generation programs mature with respect to their readiness for evaluation, the field itself will mature as more evidence of increasing sophistication is generated.

Funding to increase program readiness for evaluation. This type of funding could help a program to prepare for taking part in an evaluation by, for example, supporting the development and refinement of its theory of change and ensuring that the necessary data infrastructure, including processes for timely collection of high-quality data, is in place. Programs would be assisted in choosing program components that have been previously tested and in implementing those components according to the protocols or standards that are available, including adequate training for staff and systems to monitor quality.

Funding for integrated data systems. Researchers will need robust data collection plans and tools like integrated data systems. Such systems allow for the linking of administrative data spanning multiple organizations, which often are government agencies but may also include a group of social service providers with a common set of clients. If possible, integrated data systems should be used at the outset, so that the long-term outcomes can be measured even if there is attrition; doing so will also help to keep down costs for long-term outcome studies. In addition, having a reasonable counterfactual is important. If randomized control trials are not possible at the outset, researchers can use the integrated data system and propensity score matching or other techniques to get a reasonable comparison group.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Invest in Appropriate Research Designs

Situating the two-generation field and particular programs within a developmental context with respect to evaluation is critical to determining the types of research designs that can help to build a stronger evidence base. In particular, philanthropies and public agencies can expand the evidence base by providing the following:

Funding for implementation studies. In addition to support for evaluating the effectiveness of program strategies, funding for implementation studies is critically important. The goal of an implementation evaluation is to understand how services and supports are working to achieve the mission of the two-generation approach. This method can reveal individual factors and factors in combination that are not yet known to contribute to desired outcomes for families. Insights into implementation barriers and facilitators may also be produced.

Funding for longitudinal studies. The length, and consequently the level of resources, of evaluation studies could better match the aspirations of two-generation programs, which may take some time to develop before demonstrating improvement. Observing families over an extended period would allow for better tracking of change and short- and long-term outcomes. Longitudinal studies can also provide researchers with information about causal relationships.

Funding for cross-site evaluation studies. Collecting a common set of data from participants in multiple sites, and comparing results across sites, is an ongoing challenge for researchers. This applies to efforts led by the same service provider (e.g., a two-generation approach in two different neighborhoods of the same city) and efforts led by separate providers (e.g., two unique programs in close proximity to one another). Researchers need uniform data to more effectively translate trends across sites into meaningful and actionable recommendations. Investing in systematized or standardized methods for collecting primary data, and ultimately merging data across promising approaches, may help to provide a "big-picture" understanding of how implementation relates to outcomes.

FUNDING IN FOCUS:
INVESTING IN APPROPRIATE RESEARCH DESIGNS — CAP TULSA

What is CAP Tulsa? *The Community Action Project of Tulsa, Oklahoma (CAP Tulsa) uses a two-generation approach to help families work toward a secure future while at the same time providing supports to prepare children for success in school. Its CareerAdvance program, for example, connects parents to free career training in nursing and other health care positions while children enroll in high-quality Head Start programming.*

How does CAP Tulsa contribute to two-generation research? *CAP Tulsa operates an Innovation Lab that partners with universities to produce implementation and process evaluations, as well as assessments of outcomes for parents and children. These analyses use randomized control trials or quasi-experimental, mixed methods to more rigorously understand the implementation of CareerAdvance and its effectiveness for parents and children.*

What could funders learn from CAP Tulsa? *CAP Tulsa's ability to build evidence is due in part to the fact that the organization has received dedicated funding for research and evaluation at multiple levels. In addition, CAP Tulsa partners with research institutions that have a high capacity to complete data-driven assessments of programs like CareerAdvance. Funders could identify opportunities to support research and evaluation efforts at multiple levels, and help cultivate partnerships between service providers and organizations that can rigorously assess outcomes.*

RECOMMENDATION 4

Help Advance the Field

Funders can also help advance the two-generation field by closing the gap between theory and research on one hand, and programs and practice on the other. For example,

FUNDING IN FOCUS:
HELPING ADVANCE THE FIELD — JEREMIAH PROGRAM

What is Jeremiah Program? *Jeremiah Program, operating in five cities, is a housing-focused, two-generation approach supporting single mothers and their children. The program's emphasis on individual goals sets it apart from other two-generation approaches. A combination of coordinated supports for parents and children (e.g., employment services, early childhood programs and parenting skills development) are tailored to each family.*

How is Jeremiah Program helping to advance the field? *Jeremiah Program has made a strategic decision to demonstrate its outcomes and effectiveness in a way that will advance awareness of what works. To achieve this objective, Jeremiah shares compelling stories about the difference the program has made for graduates and current participants. Jeremiah's leadership also engage in national conversations to more widely disseminate the design and outcomes of the Jeremiah approach.*

What could funders learn from Jeremiah? *Two-generation approaches to reducing poverty can be difficult to explain to audiences unfamiliar with the language and nuances of practice, policy, research and other important aspects. Funders could consider how to make investments that help stakeholders and decision makers become more literate in two-generation practice and evidence, so that more opportunities for implementation emerge.*

funders could help to build the field in the following ways:

Funding research that is accessible and actionable for program leaders. While expanding the evidence base is the primary goal, a secondary yet critical task is communicating evaluation findings and insights to program leaders and staff in concise, accessible formats (e.g., practice and policy briefs). Presenting findings accessibly also helps policymakers to better understand two-generation approaches and potential options to support or implement them, which can then be used to improve other programs and expand the evidence base.

Developing tools for program leaders to adopt promising or effective practices or components. The development of practical resources, such as a research-informed continuum of program integration, can help program leaders understand, in concrete terms, the elements (either hypothesized or supported by existing evidence) of effective programs and how they can integrate them.

Funding research focusing on systemic barriers that perpetuate and sustain intergenerational poverty and can impede two-generation approaches. Research is needed that establishes a clear link between social and structural factors such as systemic racism and intergenerational poverty, and also demonstrates how these barriers can limit the effectiveness of two-generation approaches. This research should contribute to a body of knowledge that can inform change in policies, programs and practices that serve to reduce racial and ethnic inequities and improve the lives of families transitioning out of poverty.

conclusion

Over the past several years, concern has increased about the continuing high rates of intergenerational poverty and the negative consequences of living in poverty for both parents and their children. With this concern has come a significant resurgence of interest in two-generation approaches as viable interventions for interrupting the intergenerational cycle of poverty and promoting successful outcomes for both generations. The field has grown and learned much since the earliest forays into two-generation approaches, as shown, for example, by the evolution of theories of change over the past several decades. Yet many key questions vital to the success and growth of these approaches remain unanswered — and in some cases, unasked. The field as a whole will miss opportunities to advance if more attention and critical resources are not devoted to strategic investments that can help fill these gaps in knowledge through rigorous evaluations.

Both public and private funders can play an important role in strengthening the evidence base by identifying promising and effective two-generation approaches, which in turn can inform future program enhancements and designs. Through their decisions about how to allocate resources, funders make critical decisions not only about which programs flourish and expand, but also about which programs get evaluated, how and how long they are evaluated and, more fundamentally, which questions get answered, or even posed, via those evaluations.

The funding priorities and recommendations in this brief outline a strategy for the allocation of funders' resources. They are intended to serve as a starting point for funders to have conversations — among their own staff, leadership and external partners — about how their efforts already contribute to the knowledge about what works, and areas in which further contributions can be made. Those contributions may take a number of forms, including new or expansion grants as well as adjustments to grant priorities and study design (e.g., use of mixed methods, capacity building and longer time horizons for evaluation).

With a clear understanding of gaps, a strong dose of intentionality and a willingness to collaborate, funders have a unique opportunity to significantly strengthen the foundation of the two-generation evidence base and move closer to realizing the potential of these approaches to strengthen families and help lift them out of poverty.

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