

# Year in Review



2020



PROJECT  
EVIDENT



As I reflect on 2020 and prepare for 2021, I am both concerned and optimistic. I am optimistic that, with vaccines now available, an end to the COVID pandemic may be in sight. However, I am concerned that there is no vaccine that can cure us of our social ills, including racial injustice. Project Evident is uniquely positioned to partner with global leaders to drive innovation and solutions to address these issues. This is our challenge and our opportunity.

While I have always valued serving others, I feel like my journey began in earnest when I met Project Evident's founder Kelly Fitzsimmons 20 years ago. I'm so glad that, more than 15 years later, we made the decision to launch Project Evident in order to drive the next generation of evidence in the social sector. I have enjoyed helping build our world-class team at Project Evident and am proud of the organizations we have partnered with to improve their outcomes.

COVID-driven financial challenges have forced most organizations in the social sector to quickly learn to do more with less. Conversely, the increased focus on social and economic justice has created a tremendous opportunity for these same organizations to turn newfound awareness and investments into sustained progress supported by evidence. Project Evident will be asked to lead in this effort. I am confident that we are prepared to rise to the challenge.



Archie Jones  
Project Evident Board Chair



Kelly Fitzsimmons  
Project Evident Founder/Chief Executive

## Message from the Founder

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Hits and grit, loss and survival, ignorance and awakening: 2020 was quite a year. The coronavirus pandemic, police killings, and polarizing national and local elections made it all too clear how deeply divided our nation has become. Like many of you, we started 2020 full of optimism and plans for a new year and a new decade. Not so much.

Project Evident was founded nearly four years ago out of a sense of "constructive dissatisfaction" with data and evidence use in the social and education sectors. We sought an alternative approach, one that empowered practitioners and communities in order to drive outcomes. Today our commitment is stronger than ever. We are keenly aware that it often falls on practitioners at nonprofits, school districts, and local government to respond effectively – with head and heart – to increasing needs and decreasing budgets. We understand the demands and the fatigue these

leaders are confronting, and we are committed to standing alongside them as we learn, adapt, and build evidence for new solutions. With their leadership, we can usher in the next generation of evidence – one that is more equitable, relevant, and timely for the challenges of today.

That leadership was on full display this past year. We are filled with awe and gratitude for the way our partners stepped up to meet the needs of their communities. From rapidly pivoting to virtual service delivery, to providing home deliveries of groceries and other necessities, to offering programs free of charge, our partners have been tireless in their efforts to minimize disruption for students, provide additional resources to families, and create safe and supportive work environments for their own teams.

I am also proud of the ability and deep commitment of the Project Evident team to provide critical support to those partners. We helped a range of organizations use data and evidence to make decisions and to balance urgent needs with long-term impact goals. We offered pro-bono consultation and coaching to more than 40 nonprofits and school districts. And we helped leaders more intentionally integrate the voices of front-line staff and program participants into their evidence-building practices.

2020 also called for introspection. The year laid bare the fact that by centering whiteness – in philanthropy, policy, research, and healthcare – our systems have failed to extend a duty of care to Black and Brown communities. To strengthen our own Belonging, Dignity, and Justice (BDJ) muscles, we held a number of open forums and partnered with external experts at Decolonize Design. Leaning into tension and recentering our work has sparked a more intentional and open

journey for our team as we strive to help ourselves and our partners better address racism and bias and contribute to a more vibrant democracy.

As we enter 2021, this will be the work of Project Evident. By helping practitioners and informing funders and policymakers, we can accelerate the use of data and evidence in actionable and equitable ways for communities. It is time to put into consistent and sustained practice what we know, and to learn how to address what we don't. It is time to deploy our best talents, to spur the next generation of evidence, to listen to more people better, and not only to build back but to dismantle what no longer serves us as a nation. It is time that we are accountable for our own impact at all levels.

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## OUR APPROACH TO EVIDENCE



Centers on community needs and outcomes



Empowers practitioners to drive evidence building in service of their communities



Builds capacity of funders, policymakers, researchers and intermediaries to support practitioners with actionable evidence

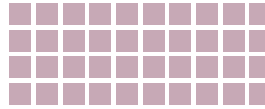


Supports continuous generation of evidence for innovations and improvements in policies, programs, and practices

## 2020 By the Numbers

# 81

Total number of organizations supported by Project Evident



40 participated in Office Hours



16 participated in Talent Accelerators



29 participated in Custom Engagements



# 47

Total Number of Custom Engagements\*



### DRIVE STRATEGY



### SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION

Strategic Evidence Planning

- Theory of change
- Learning agenda
- Impact framework

Performance monitoring

Evaluation planning

Grantmaking strategy

Policy and funding

Technical assistance, training, facilitation, and/or coaching on:

- Strategy implementation
- Data infrastructure
- Data collection and analysis

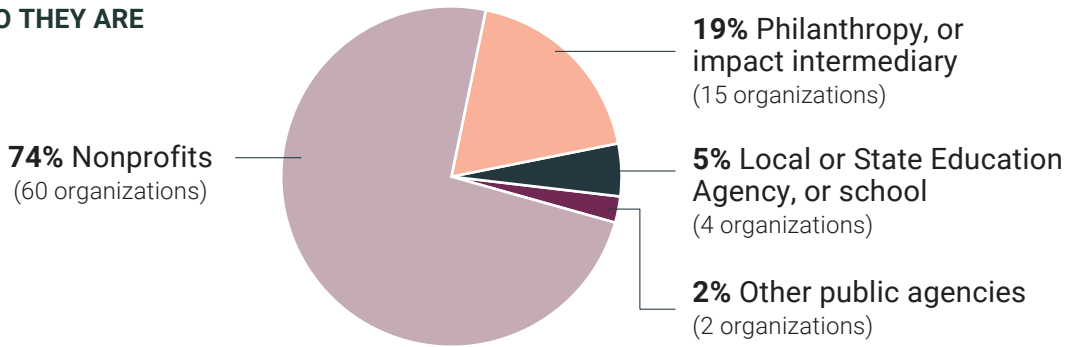
Developmental evaluation

Evidence communication, case studies

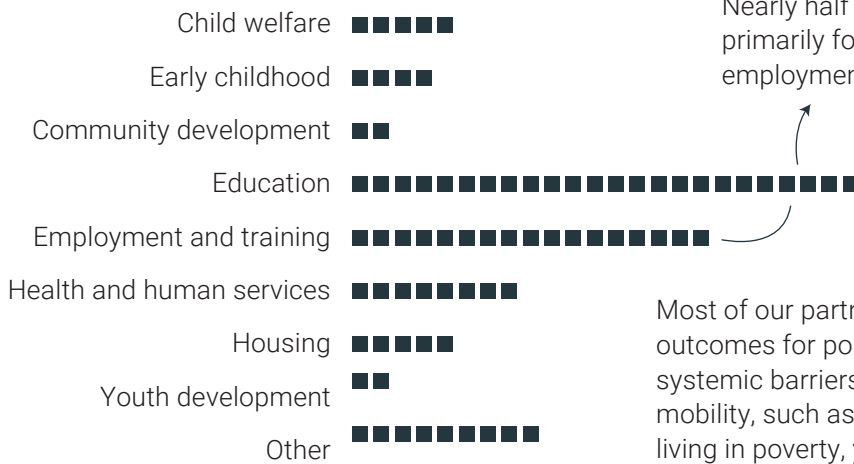
**\*Several organizations participated in multiple engagements with Project Evident in 2020.**

# Snapshot: Our Partners

## WHO THEY ARE



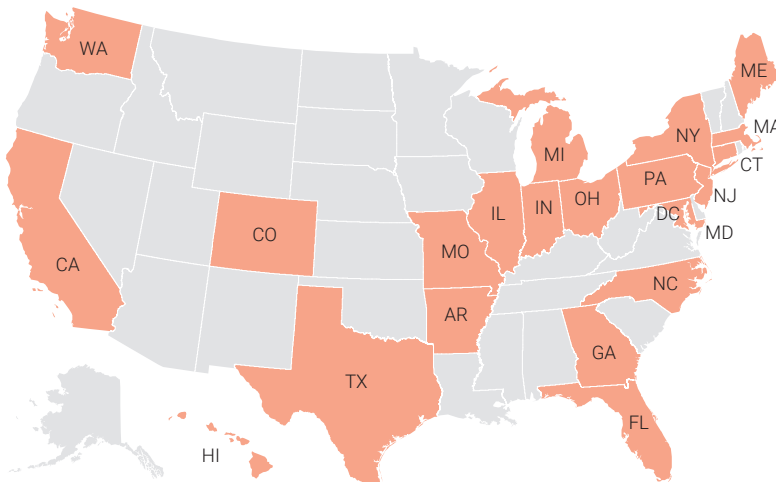
## WHAT ARE THEIR PRIMARY FOCUS AREAS



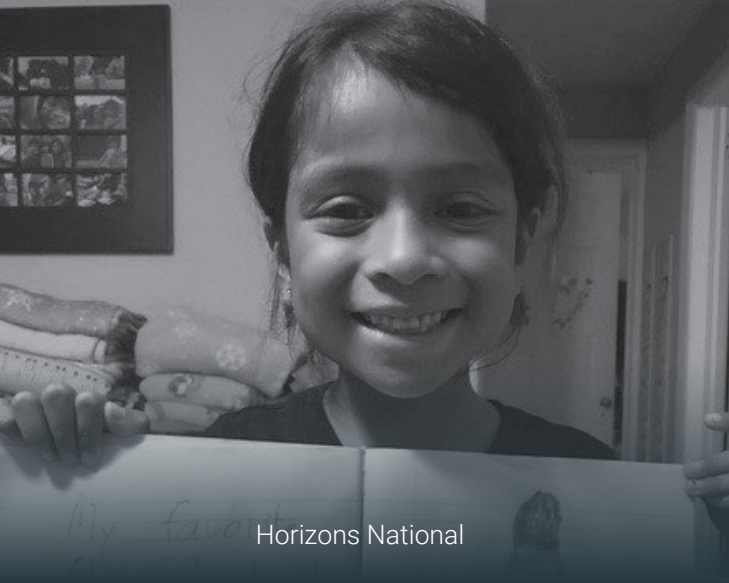
Nearly half of our 2020 partners primarily focus on education or employment-related initiatives.

Most of our partners seek to improve outcomes for populations who have faced systemic barriers to social and economic mobility, such as people of color, people living in poverty, youth in foster care, or people who were incarcerated.

## WHERE ARE THEY LOCATED



The map shows states where our 2020 partners have offices or programs. Many of our partners, namely foundations and intermediaries, serve communities in other states where they do not have offices. We're also working with an impact intermediary that works across Canada.



“Having skilled thought partners to help us navigate through these uncertain times is much appreciated!”

– Sanobar Sajan, Director of Learning and Evaluation, Juma Ventures

## Our Work with Nonprofits

Nonprofits deliver a sizable chunk of the nation’s education, health, and social services. While they faced severe financial challenges as a result of the pandemic, they stepped up to serve their communities in creative ways as the demand for their services grew – adapting existing services and developing new ones to reach those in need. We were proud to support our nonprofit partners in making adaptations to

their services and data collection to meet the emerging needs of their communities, and to develop evidence that can inform future innovations as conditions evolve. We also continued to support our nonprofit partners with Strategic Evidence Planning and developing capacities to build and use evidence that can inform their longer-term priorities around outcomes for their constituents and their communities.



Gabriel Rhoads  
Managing Director, Evaluation Services  
Project Evident

“The past year has been historic on many fronts, and has amplified the importance and urgency of equitable community and recovery outcomes. This has placed a great deal of pressure on nonprofit and philanthropic leaders. We are proud to support them in this moment with strategic evidence building to accelerate and simplify their efforts to meet these needs.”

***“Learning from constituents has been a significant focus since partnering with Project Evident. We’ve been able to adapt and act more effectively based on the feedback systems we’ve built.”***

– David Leopold, Director of Research & Evaluation, College Bound Dorchester

Select examples:

Disruptions to the education system amid COVID-19 increased the urgency for **Horizons National’s** programs for children in underserved communities. Project Evident assisted Horizons National with engaging affiliates in adapting measurement and data collection strategies, as they pivoted to virtual delivery during the summer of 2020 and continue to innovate their approaches to support students throughout the academic year.

**Habitat for Humanity International** engaged Project Evident to design a common outcome measurement approach they can use to align data collection and analysis across the US affiliate network and help define a comprehensive research and learning agenda tied to Habitat’s organizational strategy in the US.

Project Evident helped **The Center for Transforming Lives** to enhance their theory of change, data collection, and evidence building efforts to support the organization’s two-generation approach to addressing the needs of women and children, with a goal of more quickly adapting services to meet client needs, demonstrating service effectiveness, and influencing policy.

**Treehouse for Kids** strives to advance equitable outcomes for youth in foster care in Washington state by providing them with academic and other essential supports, and advocating for systems and policies that reduce inequities and barriers to their success. Project Evident is partnering with Treehouse to refine their theory of change and to create an evidence roadmap to advance the organization’s goals around outcome measurement, adaptive learning, and systems change.

Project Evident worked with **Pace Center for Girls** on a framework for continuous improvement and community engagement to serve a larger population of girls. This framework helped inform decision making as the pandemic forced a pivot. Pace transitioned nearly 2000 girls across Florida to virtual programming, recentered the organization on the importance of culture, and maintained their focus on the use of data to improve outcomes for girls, staff, and the organization.



Baltimore City Public Schools

## Our Work with School Districts

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Our Education Practice supports school districts, education agencies, nonprofits, funders, and other intermediaries in building and using evidence to improve decision-making and drive outcomes for students. As the education sector navigated the unprecedented disruption to in-person schooling and student services in 2020, along with the economic downturn from the pandemic, Project Evident helped partners

address critical short-term challenges in a data-driven manner while planning for long-term recovery. In addition to designing custom engagements to provide strategic planning, implementation, and decision-making support to partners, we organized a series of webinars on “scenario planning” to help state and local education agencies better use evidence to plan against uncertainties and support student learning and well-being.



Bi Vuong  
Managing Director, Education Practice  
Project Evident

“It has been a genuine privilege to work with organizations that remain relentlessly focused on improving outcomes and opportunities for students.”



***“We were seeking a partner who understands us and what we need. Project Evident has proven to be that partner.”***

– Baltimore City Public Schools

Select examples:

The **Academic Development Institute (ADI)** works with states, districts, schools, families, and communities to build their capacity to advance students’ academic and personal development. Project Evident worked with ADI to develop tools, resources, and training for regional comprehensive centers and state education agencies. These tools include a guide on strategic budgeting, a framework focused on organizational coherence, and a chapter in a forthcoming resource on equity and opportunity.

Project Evident has played a pivotal role in assisting **The Canopy**, a project of The Christensen Institute and Transcend, to collect and analyze information on innovative school models. The information collected through these surveys will help to identify new schools to highlight and learn from, promising but perhaps under-the-radar school models, and innovative practices being deployed by schools as they pivoted to virtual learning.

**Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS)** is working with Project Evident on a multi-year initiative to strengthen the effectiveness of their career and technical education (CTE) programs. Project Evident provided analytical and decision-making support to make immediate improvements to the CTE portfolio during the 2020-21 school year — shifting resources in an evidence-driven manner to increase equitable access to programs that can lead to in-demand, living wage occupations for students. Project Evident is continuing its work with BCPS to support the development of a four-year career readiness plan to improve opportunities and outcomes for CTE students and to refine program offerings and implementation.

***“I anticipate using this information with my assigned States as they develop their State systemic improvement plans . . . The ability to help them work through multiple scenarios in the planning phase will decrease the likelihood of wasted efforts and abandoned projects.”***

– ADI training participant



RWJF Culture of Health Prize community  
Lake County, Colorado

# Our Work with Philanthropy and Impact Intermediaries

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In 2020, Project Evident worked with more than a dozen foundations, venture philanthropies, and other impact intermediaries to set and drive evidence-building agendas that can most effectively support their work with grantees and communities. While the nature of our work with each partner varied — ranging from developing learning agendas for grantmaking teams to providing Strategic Evidence Planning and technical assistance to grantees — nearly all our partners sought to understand the impact of their own work on grantees, while building the capacity of grantees to produce evidence that demonstrates impact on communities and that can drive continuous improvements. We also supported many partners in their

efforts to center their grantmaking and evidence-building work on improving racial and economic equity, particularly in the context of the pandemic's disparate effects on communities of color.

Select examples:

Project Evident is providing Strategic Evidence Planning, implementation support, and coaching to multiple initiatives across the **Bainum Family Foundation**, in addition to developing an evidence plan for the overall foundation that supports their impact and learning goals. Taken together, the partnership is strengthening the foundation's capacity to generate evidence that can guide improvements in the design and implementation of their initiatives, and ultimately outcomes for communities.

“In every way imaginable, Project Evident exceeded our expectations — pushing and stretching our thinking around our strategy and the “why” behind each effort. They have helped us unearth strategic questions we needed to both ask and answer in order to move our work forward, and they are currently helping us solidify a roadmap that will lay out the timeline of important steps we have ahead of us.”

– **Amy Soper**, Director, Seventh-day Adventist Initiative, Bainum Family Foundation

Project Evident partnered with **Salesforce** to develop a “Social Services Impact Playbook” for their network, including Salesforce.com and Salesforce.org. The Playbook defines Salesforce’s vision for impact management, and outlines the competencies, practices, and technologies leaders need to build a comprehensive approach to using data and evidence across an organization’s programming and operations.

Project Evident has supported the **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)** Culture of Health Prize-winning communities’ responses to the pandemic, offering practical tools through a series of webinars and providing consulting support to select organizations. These efforts inform a practical plan for integrating strategic, continuous evidence building into the work of RWJF grantees in ways that advance those organizations and the field.

The **Future Skills Centre (FSC)** strives to strengthen Canada’s skills development ecosystem to equip Canadians with the skills, knowledge, and tools they need to thrive in the future. Project Evident has worked with the FSC team to use evidence to fuel more innovation in the skills ecosystem and learn together with project grantees.

**The Promise** is a \$20M/year collaboration between the city of Philadelphia, philanthropy, community-based organizations, and the United Way to reduce Philadelphia’s poverty rate and support an equitable recovery from the pandemic. Project Evident is helping the initiative build a knowledge center to drive measurement and evaluation, tell the story of community impact, mobilize learning, and adapt grantmaking.

Project Evident worked with **REDF**, a venture philanthropy, to develop an impact framework and evidence plan for their 2021-2025 strategic period, helping ensure that their grantmaking and programmatic strategies are strongly grounded in measurable outcomes — for both the social enterprises REDF supports and the people they employ and empower. We continue to support REDF with the implementation of their evidence plan, including the design of data collection processes and protocols.

## PIVOTING DURING THE PANDEMIC

Project Evident surveyed its partner organizations over the summer to understand how the pandemic was affecting their work. Two-thirds of our partners who responded to the impact survey reported that their work with Project Evident had left them better prepared to adapt during the pandemic.

“We have better data capacity to respond quickly, adapt quickly.”

– Susan Smith  
Second Harvest of Silicon Valley

“As we pivot and adapt our support to families and schools, we are also needing to be flexible around prioritizing around data collection activities. Our work with Project Evident has built collaboration and cohesion in the teams making these decisions.”

– Erin Lashua-Shriftman  
ParentCorps

“Project Evident encouraged us to think about evidence collection in more agile ways, especially through rapid-cycle models. We are applying this framework to the evaluation of our distance learning strategies and approaches.”

– Chavaughn Brown  
AppleTree Institute for Education  
Innovation

“I love the way this engages the staff by allowing them to become more aware and more involved in shaping the agency . . . In this way, we serve not only our community but also our work family.”

– Evan Jones, LGBTQ+ Advocate,  
Sojourner House

## Building Capacity

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This is a challenging and difficult time for nonprofit leaders. Demand for services is increasing, their organizations have been disrupted, and decision making loneliness and fatigue have set in. COVID-19 is reshaping the philanthropy and nonprofit sectors, with smaller community-based nonprofits at greater risk.

Project Evident helps build the capacity of these organizations to use evidence to make decisions, even during crisis, and continue to deliver strong and equitable outcomes for their communities. Through our Talent Accelerator and Office Hours initiatives, Project Evident provides much needed support to community organizations, and leverages those activities to feed into deeper data collection, insights, and shared learning for the field.

***“I think the Talent Accelerator is about boosting managerial courage. If you want to create a stronger organization, a stronger team, an inclusive team, then it just takes managerial courage to do that.”***

**– Mickey Cockrell, CEO & Co-founder, Catie’s Closet**

## **Talent Accelerator**

In 2020, 16 organizations participated in Talent Accelerators, virtual learning designed to strengthen data, decision-making, and evidence building skills of diverse nonprofit leaders and staff. This year in particular focused on the challenges brought on by the pandemic and the reckoning with systemic racism. Participants benefited from equity-focused content, expert coaching, a diverse cohort, and a community of peers as they built practical, actionable skills they can apply to the context and mission of their own organizations – and to improve equitable outcomes for the communities they serve.

## **Office Hours**

Over the course of 2020, our team of experts provided pro bono consulting to 40 nonprofit organizations and school districts on using data and evidence to adapt their programs and optimize their impact in the midst of escalating needs and continued disruption. Initially a temporary service we started at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, we saw a clear need from leaders who might not have otherwise been able to access our services; and so with generous funding from the Barr Foundation and vocal support from our team, we have continued our Office Hours program.



**Dr. Charles E. Carter, Jr.**  
Senior Evidence Director  
Project Evident

*“Even in the face of the challenges of the pandemic, I’ve been impressed with the persistence of the organizations participating in the Talent Accelerator. We maintained close to 100% attendance through both cohorts in 2020 and witnessed significant progress in building capacity for learning, intentional inclusion of underrepresented voices, and identification of clear next steps aligned with their evidence agendas.”*

## DRAFT EXCERPTS FROM “BUILD ME THE EVIDENCE”

Many practitioners know that evidence building is not in opposition to accomplishing the primary work – which has been and will always be providing high-quality direct services to children and families – but in support of it. The picture is nuanced: while programmatic endeavors continue to hold special weight, the importance and urgency of the work that is needed at scale to address the country’s problems requires a rigorous and robust evidence gathering and review infrastructure. Scale demands evidence, both for fundraising and to allow a complete understanding of increasingly complex pathways of activities, inputs, outputs, and results.

- Dr. Betina Jean-Louis  
Principal Consultant, Arc of Evidence

But as important as it is to build evidence, it’s just as important to ask, “Who is required to show evidence to prove their basic humanity? . . . This is what I call “evidence as a double standard.” When policies that uplift Black and brown people are at issue, “evidence” is too often used in calculated, inhumane ways to reach some cold cost-benefit analysis, completely removed from the real lives and lived experiences of the people affected by the policies. On the other hand, largely white communities too often use “evidence” as a proxy to deny poor people access to the resources and programs wealthier people take for granted.

- Dr. Michael McAfee  
President & CEO, PolicyLink

# Changing the Evidence Ecosystem

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Harnessing the power of data and evidence requires we share knowledge and resources so that practitioners and funders understand the importance of continuous evidence building and increase investment in what works. Through our initiatives, we promote policies and practices to support practitioner-led evidence building and use and to strengthen the field of evidence.

***“The heart of what we’re trying to do with the next generation of evidence building is focus on practitioners. They need access to skills so that they can run the whole show . . . This means better financing and more innovation. There are a lot of ways we can better support practitioners that can have an impact on how effective they are.”***

– **Ron Haskins**, Former Co-Chair, U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking and Senior Fellow Emeritus at the Brookings Institution

## **Actionable Evidence Initiative**

With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by Project Evident and Dr. Rebecca Maynard of the University of Pennsylvania, the Actionable Evidence Initiative seeks to understand and remove the barriers to building “actionable evidence” that is timely, practical, inclusive, and centered on the needs of practitioners.

The Initiative kicked off in the fall of 2020 with a convening of researchers, practitioners, and funders coming together to develop a multi-year strategy for building and using actionable evidence across education policy and practice. Over the next year, the Initiative will foster a community of practice, create a shared framework to encourage more actionable evidence building, and share case studies showcasing how researchers, evaluators, and practitioners are working together to improve outcomes for Black, Latinx, and disadvantaged students.

## **Next Generation of Evidence**

In July of 2020 we launched the Next Generation of Evidence Campaign in order to advance a more equitable and effective evidence ecosystem – one that is practitioner-centric, embraces an ‘R&D’ approach, and elevates community voice. The Campaign does this through convenings, policy and partnership initiatives, and field communications.

A key component of the Next Generation of Evidence Campaign is a new book, *Build Me the Evidence*. Set to be published in 2021, the book builds on Ron Haskins’ *Show Me the Evidence, Obama’s Fight for Rigor and Results in Social Policy* published in 2015, and will focus on how practitioner-centric evidence building can lead to earlier and stronger outcomes, with contributions from a diverse group of practitioners, funders, policymakers, researchers, and other field leaders.

**“By helping practitioners and informing funders and policymakers, we can accelerate the use of data and evidence in actionable and equitable ways for communities.”**

**- Kelly Fitzsimmons**  
Founder, Project Evident



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Learn more at  
[projectevident.org](https://projectevident.org)

**Project Evident is especially grateful for the support of key partners:**

Barr Foundation  
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation  
Carnegie Corporation of New York  
Chan Zuckerberg Initiative  
Doris Duke Charitable Foundation  
The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation  
Laura and John Arnold Foundation  
Overdeck Family Foundation  
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**Our work would not be possible without our team and advisors:**

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