

Roadmaps for Continuous Improvement and Evidence Building in the Social Sector

Early Lessons from Strategic Evidence Planning



JUNE 2018

PROJECT
EVIDENT



Project Evident is testing a new, strategic approach to evidence building that places social sector practitioners in the driver's seat and embeds continuous data use, learning, and evaluation at the core of nonprofit operations. The ultimate goal is to increase the supply of outcomes-producing programs for communities that need them. In 2017, we partnered with three nonprofit organizations to pilot the creation of Strategic Evidence Plans (SEP) – multi-year roadmaps to accelerate investments and activities for continuous evidence generation and program improvement that are grounded in each organization's operational reality and learning agenda. This report introduces the SEP process and discusses early lessons from the three pilots with Center for Employment Opportunities, First Place for Youth, and PowerMyLearning.

Table of Contents

Introduction 3

What is a Strategic Evidence Plan (SEP)? 5

Findings and Lessons from the SEP Pilots 7

Looking Ahead 12

SEP Snapshot: Center for Employment Opportunities 14

SEP Snapshot: First Place for Youth 16

SEP Snapshot: PowerMyLearning 18

Introduction

In recent years, more and more government and philanthropic organizations have begun demanding proof that programs work before they reshape policies and allocate resources; as a result, evidence-based programs and policymaking in the social sector have grown more and more important.¹ Despite this momentum and the pressing need for effective solutions to growing economic inequality and the opportunity gap, however, not many programs can produce rigorous evidence that they make life better for disadvantaged Americans. To a large extent, the pipeline of programs with a strong evidence base is narrow because:

- Most providers of social services in poor communities lack the capacity, resources, and data they need to rigorously measure their impact. Government and philanthropic rarely help them build evaluation and learning capacity or data and technology infrastructure.
- The prevailing evidence-building model is driven by the interests of funders, policymakers, and researchers who want to “prove” impact or to fill gaps in research evidence, rather than by what practitioners need to learn in order to improve services for their communities.

For practitioners, evidence of impact is inextricably tied to improving program implementation and performance monitoring. In surveys and interviews with hundreds of nonprofit organizations between 2016 and 2018, Project Evident found that nonprofit leaders, deeply committed to understanding the impact of their work on program beneficiaries, are desperate to get better at collecting data and using it to measure outcomes. Contrary to conventional wisdom, practitioners want to build evidence not to meet grant requirements or check off boxes for funders but to provide better services and show that those services make a difference.²

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We anchor on mission... not doing it for compliance and reporting, but because you want to be as good as you can be.

NONPROFIT LEADER

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¹ Feldman, Andrew. 2017. “Strengthening Results-Focused Government: Strategies to Build on Bipartisan Progress in Evidence-Based Policy.” [Brookings Institution](#).

² Project Evident’s findings are supported by prior studies and surveys conducted by the [Center for Effective Philanthropy](#) and the [Innovation Network](#).

Despite a general commitment to outcomes, practitioners are too often the “caboose” of the evidence-building train rather than the “engine.” Policymakers and funders who demand evidence rarely consider nonprofits’ operational and financial realities or even use evidence to set policy or award contracts once they have it. As a result, it’s not always clear to practitioners what value there is in evidence-building investments. Meanwhile, external evaluations of program impact don’t necessarily produce timely evidence that practitioners can use to improve their programs.

Project Evident is working towards a new normal for evidence building by giving practitioners access to the strategy, tools, and talent they need to lead their own evidence agenda. We also connect them to sustainable support from informed funders and policymakers to advance the building and use of evidence on a continuous basis and as a core part of nonprofit operations – enabling a healthier ecosystem whose incentives are aligned with its outcomes. Our ultimate goal is an ecosystem with more evidence-based, outcomes-producing programs for communities in need.

Strategic Evidence Planning is a central component of Project Evident’s work to date – one that advances a new starting point for building evidence, grounded in an individual organization’s capacity, strategic direction, policy context, and learning agenda. During needs assessments conducted during Project Evident’s incubation phase, leaders at social sector organizations said they wanted collaborators who could help them meet their complex evidence goals, which are shaped both by internal learning agendas and by external funder and policy demands. They wanted expert researchers – who understood that what an organization could accomplish was shaped both by its own capacity and by the context in which it operates – to help them develop plans that could attract the investments required for their execution.

We began prototyping the Strategic Evidence Plans (SEP) development process with three nonprofit partners in the fall of 2017, and we expect to complete more than a dozen more SEPs by the end of 2018. The next section describes the SEP process in greater detail.

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Many funders want to fund programs that are evidence-based or to fund the type of research that would lead to a third-party rigorous evaluation that “proves” program impact. However, just as important is funding [for evidence building] that leads to this type of rigorous evaluation work.

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Evaluators need to see themselves as partners with direct service providers. Many evaluators are interested in the science of program evaluation but lack the perspective of providers looking to improve impact.

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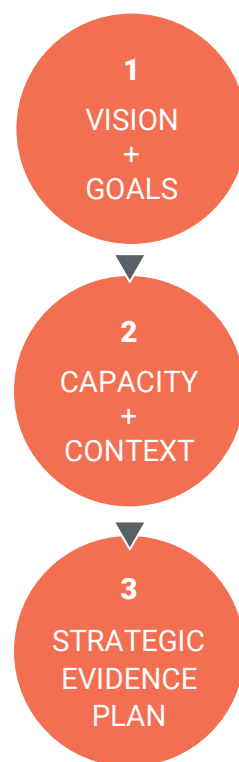
What is a Strategic Evidence Plan?

A Strategic Evidence Plan (SEP) is a multi-year roadmap that accelerates investments and activities for continuous evidence generation and program improvement. The SEP is designed to help practitioners:

- Define a 3-5-year learning agenda and evidence priorities aligned with the organization's mission and strategic priorities,
- Assess organizational capacity and identify investments needed to achieve evidence priorities,
- Outline a sequence of actionable steps to implement the plan,
- Identify approaches to evaluation, learning, and evidence building that are appropriate for the learning agenda, including small-scale, rapid tests of changes that may lead to program improvement,
- Create internal and external alignment among staff and key stakeholders to create a strong foundation for implementation,
- Optimize alignment with local, state, and federal budget and policy priorities,
- Communicate a framework for evidence-building decisions and activities to funders and policymakers, and
- Prepare for third-party evaluations, when appropriate.

Project Evident has designed a **three-stage SEP process** that puts practitioners in the driver's seat, where Project Evident staff can guide them in developing a plan. Participating organizations choose a team made up of people in different roles – for example, staff from operations, program development, research and evaluation, performance monitoring, policy, etc. – to participate in this three-stage process. Project Evident also sends a team with expertise in evaluation and research methods, data science, data analytics and visualization, systems architecture, nonprofit management, philanthropy, and policy and procurement, in order to craft a plan that can truly meet nonprofits' needs. We also engage expert advisors and key stakeholders such as funders, researchers, and program beneficiaries throughout the process.

The three stages of the SEP process are described below. After agreeing on a scope of work based on initial assessments, we:



1. Establish strategic evidence vision and goals.

Project Evident helps practitioners understand how data and evidence can further their organization's mission and strategic priorities, which may include, among other things, goals for expansion and growth, demonstrating the effectiveness of individual programs or a set of programs, expanding policy influence, and/or optimizing a program model.

2. Conduct assessments of organizational capacity and context.

Project Evident conducts a series of "deep dives" to understand the organization's capacity for evaluation and learning (including staff capacity, technology and data systems, data collection and use, learning culture, and experience with prior evaluations), as well as the external context in which the organization operates (including funder and buyer priorities, policy landscape, and evidence base for organizations and program models serving similar populations). Activities for the deep dives may include interviews or focus groups with staff, program participants, evidence partners, and funders, as well as a review of relevant documents and literature. Findings from these reviews, once shared with the SEP team at the organization, may be used to sharpen the evidence goals identified in the first stage.

3. Develop the plan and recommendations with participating organization.

Based on what we learn from the capacity and context reviews, Project Evident and the partner organization draft recommendations together that guide both investments and step-by-step activities to achieve the goals set forth for the SEP, as well as cost estimates to guide necessary fundraising.

Throughout the process, Project Evident's National Evaluation Advisory Board, made up of renowned experts around the country and across policy domains, ensures the plan's rigor. After the plan is developed, Project Evident provides support with any technical issues that may arise during implementation and with funder outreach and communication.

As previously noted, Project Evident prototyped the process outlined here with three nonprofit organizations in 2017, and each iteration worked largely as envisioned. Our nonprofit partners and their leadership were highly engaged in each stage of the process and gave Project Evident teams access to the staff, participants, and information necessary to clearly assess capacity and context. This led to clear, actionable recommendations that the partners have said they view as both a roadmap to their evidence goals and a product that they can use to gain internal buy-in and external investments.

Findings and Lessons from the SEP Pilots

The Strategic Evidence Planning approach resonates among nonprofit leaders who want help with evidence building and continuous program improvement.

Feedback from the leadership, staff, and boards of our pilot partners suggests that the organizations valued the experience and found the resulting plans to be grounded in their operational reality and strategic vision. Chief Executive Officers at each of the three organizations – Center for Employment Opportunity, First Place for Youth, and PowerMyLearning – said that the SEP provided the guidance they needed to take ownership of their evidence agenda and to communicate their vision and goals. “With the SEP, for the first time, I was taken seriously by a funder when talking about evaluation,” reported Elisabeth Stock, the CEO of PowerMyLearning.

The SEP partners also praised Project Evident’s shared services approach, which gives practitioners access to an interdisciplinary team with expertise on every aspect of an organization’s evidence-building journey, including evaluation and research methods, data analytics and visualization, data science, technology and digital architecture, finance, policy, procurement, and philanthropy.

The pilots also produced lessons for improving the SEP process and product, and revealed potential challenges to implementation. In this section, we discuss key findings and lessons from the SEP pilots:

- **An organization has to be ready to develop an SEP and willing to invest the time necessary.**



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The SEP was exactly aligned with where we want to go. It’s important work that was a top priority [for us]. It wasn’t nice to have, we felt it was need to have.

SAM SCHAEFFER,
CEO of CENTER FOR
EMPLOYMENT
OPPORTUNITIES

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In prototyping the SEP process, Project Evident worked with three nonprofits that have shown a commitment to rigorous evidence building for program improvement and impact and a strong capacity to collect and use data. These organizations' leadership is deeply committed to building a culture of continuous learning and improvement; furthermore, leaders are motivated to ensure that theory of change and the mechanisms for improving outcomes work as intended. Key leadership (such as CEO or Director of Evaluation and Learning) committed a significant amount of time during a 4- to 6-month period to work on the SEPs with Project Evident.

We are using our experience of the pilots to streamline the SEP process and work more efficiently with partners; we expect that subsequent SEPs will be completed in 3 to 4 months. A key lesson that has emerged is that **evidence-building solutions need to meet practitioners where they are**. Recognizing that many nonprofits, even if they are committed to evidence and outcomes, lack the staff, time, or technical capacity to participate in an intensive, relatively lengthy process. Therefore we are designing and testing shorter SEPs that are more narrowly focused (for example, on a single evidence-related goal). We are also developing a menu of services that focus on specific domains (like assessing policy and procurement landscape or conducting capacity reviews of data and technical systems) that allow organizations to engage in less intensive evidence-building activities appropriate for their organizational capacity that could nevertheless potentially lead to SEPs in the future.

- **To develop evidence goals and recommendations to drive evidence generation and continuous program improvement, it is important to start with a clear theory of change.**

To identify how a program can demonstrate that it is effective—and how it can become more effective—it is critical to articulate

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First Place has been on the evaluation journey to prove our model is effective. As we've expanded and gotten deeper into what works, why, for whom, and how to continuously improve outcomes, we found ourselves at a point with multiple systems and projects. [The SEP] added a level of discipline that highlights our priority investments in order to achieve our overall mission and vision towards impact evaluation and moving national policy.

SAM COBBS,
FORMER CEO OF FIRST
PLACE FOR YOUTH

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clearly the target population, resources, activities, and operating context hypothesized to drive outcomes, especially when it comes to data collection and analysis. Brad Dudding, the Chief Impact Officer at the Center for Employment Opportunities, said that the theory of change workshop conducted by Project Evident during the SEP process “revealed a strong interest by staff to understand new ways of effectively working with sub-populations with differential needs” as the organization replicates its program in other areas of the country. As a result, the SEP includes investments and activities to help the organization customize its approach to populations with different needs across different locations, including the using predictive analytics to understand risk and success factor, collecting and analyzing participant feedback more regularly, and testing changes to the program. “Based on the success of the theory of change workshop we plan to periodically repeat this reflective process with staff to frame new questions and program iterations,” Mr. Dudding added.

During the pilots, we learned that it is important to conduct a detailed review of theory of change at the start of the SEP process in order to set realistic goals for the plan; this in turn makes it easier to assess context and capacity and to recommend action. For a new or young program, the process will probably take longer for the organization to define or refine its theory of change. The SEP for PowerMyLearning, since it focused on generating evidence for a relatively new program, required Project Evident and PowerMyLearning to work together to clarify the theory of change and to build and refine an evidence agenda around testing and learning.

For nonprofits not yet ready to engage in a full-scale SEP, Project Evident is also offering shorter engagements to help develop or refine theory of change.

- **Implementing SEPs will require investments in technology, tools, and talent, as well as a new framework for funding evidence building and continuous improvement in the nonprofit sector.**



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We have a new innovation that we developed, and we did a case study and a pilot. [The SEP] work is core to who we are and who we want to be. The timing was perfect to do a theory of change figuring out how to build the evidence around it.

ELISABETH STOCK,
CEO OF
POWERMYLEARNING

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The SEP, relying on a practitioner's capacity, identifies potential investments in the technology, analytical tools, and talent the organization needs to build evidence, improve programs, and communicate to external stakeholders. The SEP pilots, along with other engagements during our first year, revealed that many nonprofits need help using data effectively and efficiently to generate evidence, test program improvement efforts, and incorporate policy and funding considerations into evidence-building efforts.

For example, all three nonprofits that prototyped the SEP want to collect administrative data from government agencies and other sources – school records and employment data, for example – to help build evidence and conduct rapid-cycle tests of improvements. To do this, however, the organizations will have to take stock of their data and technical systems to ensure that those systems' components work well together (for example, data collection systems, data warehouse, predictive modeling applications, and dashboarding and reporting applications) and find out what additional tools they need for data wrangling (e.g. cleaning and unifying messy and complex data sets for easy access and analysis), data management, advanced data analysis, statistical modeling, data visualization, and reporting. The organizations will also need to add staff capacity and access talent with the specialized expertise needed to implement their evidence plan.

Project Evident is currently piloting several low-cost, open-source tools to help nonprofits implement evidence plans; these include access to contracted experts and a user-centered repository of evidence-building tools, along with guidance on their use. We are also examining a broader range of resources when we assess a nonprofit's data and technical infrastructure and need for tools, talent, and knowledge during the context review phase. In addition to common needs for tools, talent, and knowledge, the SEP pilots also highlighted two other areas where we are refining our efforts:

- **Capturing costs.** The SEPs promote a new test-and-learn approach that helps nonprofits build an infrastructure and mechanisms for continuous evidence generation and improvement. This means that, unlike a third-party study, the costs are dispersed across program activities; for example, to test program improvements, an organization would have to invest in both making changes to the program and measuring the effects of those changes. We are also exploring a new funding framework that puts capacity building for continuous data use, learning, and evaluation at the core of nonprofit operations.
- **Conducting tests of program improvements.** While the concept of conducting rapid cycle evaluations for quickly evaluating changes to a program has gained momentum, little guidance and few tools exist to help nonprofits in conduct these tests. We continue to explore ways to fill this gap.

Looking Ahead

Our pilot work with three pioneering organizations suggests that the SEP can be a catalyst for the “new normal” we envision – a healthier evidence ecosystem where incentives are aligned with outcomes and where there are, ultimately, more programs that alleviate rising inequality and the opportunity divide. That said, the “new normal” can only be achieved with support from public and philanthropic funders, policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders.

There are many forms this support can take. Funders – whether public or private – can ask for SEPs as a condition of funding; they can also offer social sector organizations support as they build capacity infrastructure, thereby setting practitioners up to lead their own evidence agenda. Public agencies and policymakers can further encourage building and use of evidence by choosing outcomes-based procurement and making it easier to access data. Evaluators, data scientists, and technology vendors can make more conscious efforts to meet practitioners where they are and to help them develop the talent and tools they need to do this work at lower costs. This will help practitioners improve their own capacity; it will also make it easier to produce timely and methodologically diverse evaluations that offer practical lessons.

For our part, Project Evident is using what we learned from our SEP prototypes to improve the process and to develop other services. As noted in the previous chapter, we are:

- Streamlining the SEP process to collaborate more efficiently with partners, testing shorter, less intensive, more narrowly focused SEP engagements, and developing a shareable SEP for organizations interested in running their own process with or without limited assistance from Project Evident.
- Offering technical assistance services that, by meeting practitioners where they are, allow them to build evidence in ways appropriate for their capacity. These services include assistance with policy and procurement strategy, evaluation activities (refining theory of change, setting learning agenda, assessing evaluation capacity etc.), and data and technology (audits of systems and infrastructure, customized solutions using low-cost and open source tools, and training on data and tools).
- Developing solutions to help nonprofits contract specialized talent to provide technical assistance with, among other things, data and technology infrastructure and tools, data security, evaluation methods, data science, and policy and procurement.
- Designing a prototype for a user-centered repository of evidence-building tools along with guidance on their use.

- Creating learning opportunities for funders, including advocating a new funding framework that recognizes capacity building for continuous data use, learning, and evaluation as part of the core of nonprofit operations.

Project Evident is also partnering with organizations like ChildFocus to promote evidence-based public funding and decision-making, especially in relation to the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, which reforms the federal child welfare financing streams, and the Social Impact Partnerships to Pay for Results Act (SIPPRRA). For example, we are creating opportunities to work with public and private child welfare agencies and providers to develop SEPs and provide technical assistance for those preparing to apply for SIPPRRA funding and to implement pay-for-success projects. We are also piloting an “Evidence-based Policy Mapping Tool,” designed to help practitioners prioritize policy-related investments and activities. We plan to share lessons and knowledge from the pilots, and all of the work listed above, in upcoming publications.

In the concluding pages of this report, we provide brief snapshots of the three SEPs we prototyped with our nonprofit partners, including their evidence agenda and a sampling of recommended activities and investments, many of which the organizations have already begun to put into practice. Project Evident will continue to support our partners in SEP implementation, and will release updates on their progress in upcoming reports.

SEP Snapshot: Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)

CEO's mission is to provide immediate, effective and comprehensive employment services to men and women with recent criminal convictions to help them regain the skills and confidence needed for successful transitions to stable, productive lives. The organization was started in New York City in 1996 and has grown to serve more than 5,000 people across 18 program locations in six states since then.

While expanding across the country, CEO has worked to build evidence of its impact through internal performance monitoring and data collection as well as by participating in multiple rigorous, third-party evaluations. A randomized evaluation of CEO's program in New York City found positive effects on recidivism (largest for those who enrolled shortly after their release from prison); a more recent quasi-experimental study suggests that people who complete the program are more likely to get jobs.



Image courtesy of CEO

SEP Goals

CEO's learning agenda is grounded in its theory of change and its existing evidence base: (a) clarify key program elements that contribute to the program's recidivism effects; (b) understand how it can meet differential needs among participants in different areas of the country to consistently replicate outcomes; and (c) improve long-term employment outcomes. To show meaningful program impacts, the SEP establishes goals in three areas, designed to foster a culture of adaptive learning.

- **Culture and talent:** Build capacity and practices with staff to promote ongoing reflection, dialogue and learning with data to support evidence generation;
- **Data use and tools:** Optimize the use of tools for data collection, analysis, and visualization to gain insights for program improvement;
- **Evidence practice:** Implement new practices to rigorously test program assumptions and innovations, and use the evidence generated to refine the theory of change.



Image courtesy of CEO

Sample Activities and Investments

- **Conduct rapid cycle tests of program innovations to optimize the model for outcomes.**

Test adjustments to the model with validated program data to reduce attrition and to customize services for participants with different needs. Use results of these tests, along with assessments of implementation, to explore potential third-party evaluation.

- **Use participant data and feedback to surface program improvement needs.**

Use predictive analytics to understand how participants engage and what the risk factors are; use the insights gained to enhance services. Systemically analyze participant feedback and collect additional qualitative data on participant experiences to learn what needs to be improved.

- **Create C-level evidence leadership role and formalize internal learning processes.**

Provide leadership, coaching, time, and resources to allow staff to reflect, learn and share with data in team meetings and other learning forums, leading to better knowledge, group understanding, and decision-making.

- **Leverage data analytics and visualization tools to increase staff competency around using and interpreting data and evidence.**

Incorporate staff input to make data systems more user-centered; visualize data in easily accessible dashboards so that data collection and reporting will be easier for frontline staff — reducing administrative burdens, improving service delivery, and fostering greater use of data to manage to outcomes in existing workflows.

SEP Snapshot: First Place for Youth

The mission of First Place is to help youth in foster care build the skills they need to make a successful transition to self-sufficiency and responsible adulthood. Founded in 1996 and headquartered in Oakland, the nonprofit serves nearly 1,500 youth in six California counties; about a third of the youth are served through My First Place, a program that provides housing and an array of intensive supports to youth. The organization has completed a formative evaluation of the My First Place program model and additional planning work to prepare for a third-party evaluation.



Image courtesy of First Place

SEP Goals

The SEP is firmly grounded in First Place’s mission and strategic goals to demonstrate effectiveness of My First Place through a third-party evaluation, to scale the program beyond California through an affiliate model, and to increase policy influence – all while remaining financially sustainable. Towards that end, the SEP focuses on three key goals and outlines recommendations for each.

- **Program Improvement and Impact:** Generate the most effective evidence of what works for whom and in what context;
- **Stakeholder Alignment:** Focus approach and use evidence that meets program and buyer needs; and
- **Policy Influence:** Identify and strengthen ways to share evidence both externally and internally.



Image courtesy of First Place

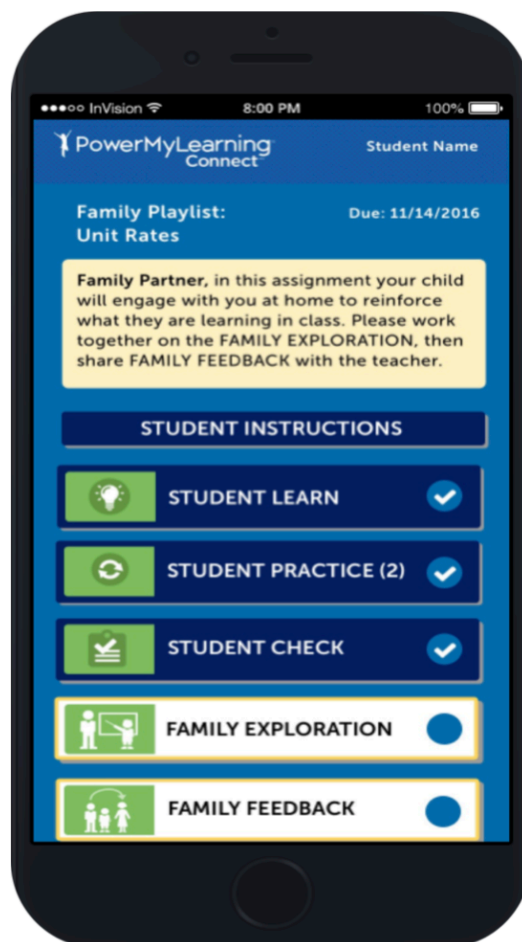
Sample Activities and Investments

- **Enhance technical infrastructure for stronger integration of systems and tools.**
Complete an audit of organization-wide digital infrastructure (i.e. systems and tools to collect, store, manage, analyze, and report data) to identify potential improvements in modularity, flexibility, and speed.
- **Enhance approach to continuous improvement through focused, rigorous, and rapid tests.** Test program innovation and improvements quantitatively by generating hypotheses in the highest priority areas associated with measurable outcomes, piloting these changes at a selection of sites, and tracking outcomes.
- **Adopt an interconnected, multi-pronged evaluation strategy predicated on key learning goals.**
Execute a series of interconnected activities to inform the scope, timing, and design of a summative impact evaluation, including the prioritization of key outcomes and research questions, understanding evaluation viability of new affiliate sites and potentially acquiring administrative data to increase understanding of key outcomes.
- **Align evaluation, policy, and development activities more closely to advance evidence-based policy agenda stakeholder alignment.** Help teams identify, align, and communicate consistently about evidence priorities and progress with philanthropy, policymakers, state and local administrators, and other partners.

SEP Snapshot: PowerMyLearning

Founded in 1999, PowerMyLearning is a national education nonprofit that seeks to improve children's academic mastery and social-emotional learning (SEL) outcomes by strengthening the "triangle" of learning relationships between students, teachers, and families. The organization partners with more than 250 schools and districts nationwide to transform teaching and family engagement through coaching and workshops and through its digital learning platform. PowerMyLearning recently developed and piloted a new, mobile-based program called Family Playlists to reinforce the relationships in the triangle.

Family Playlists are interactive homework assignments through which students practice a set of learning activities and then teach them to a family member, usually a parent, who then provides feedback to the teacher about the experience. A case study of Family Playlists conducted with the sixth grade at a New York City school in the South Bronx showed promising early results on teacher, family, and student attitudes and behavior.



SEP Goals

PowerMyLearning's learning agenda is grounded in its theory of change for Family Playlists and is focused on the three goals outlined below.

- **Teacher adoption:** Optimize the adoption process for teachers assigning Family Playlists.
- **Triangle of learning relationships:** Optimize the triangle of learning relationships among students, teachers, and families.
- **Impact on academic mastery and SEL outcomes:** Demonstrate impact on student outcomes.

The SEP crafts a multi-year vision to accelerate understanding about how to implement and improve Family Playlists to optimize take-up by teachers, students, and families and to maximize student outcomes in the next three years, laying the groundwork for a summative impact study to measure its effects on student SEL and academic mastery.



Image courtesy of PowerMyLearning

Sample activities and Investments

The Strategic Evidence Plan outlines recommendations in four areas.

- **Execute model innovation cycles for evidence generation and continuous improvement.**
Conduct a cycle of practice and research activities, including implementation research, exploratory analysis and tests of program improvements, to refine the theory of change and optimize the program model for a summative impact evaluation.
- **Build partnerships to support evidence generation and improvement.**
Establish and engage an Evaluation Advisory Committee to advise on practice and research activities, to review results from tests and evaluations, and to provide the first line of methodological validation for internal testing.
- **Enhance data, systems, and tools to support evidence generation and improvement.**
Conduct an in-depth data infrastructure audit to assess technical capacity in order to execute evidence plan. Based on the audit, enhance systems and tools for data collection, storage, integration, and visualization, as well as tools for tests of program improvements.
- **Develop and implement a communications plan for optimal messaging of evidence efforts.**
Craft a multi-pronged plan for different audiences and stakeholders, including educators, national and regional education groups, private funders, and decision-makers at state and local school district levels.