

SECTION 1

CENTERING ON PRACTITIONERS AND THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE

*For too long, practitioners have been the caboose
of the evidence train, when they should have been
the engine.*

—KELLY FITZSIMMONS AND ARCHIE JONES,
“CONSTRUCTIVE DISSATISFACTION”

Where we stand determines what we see. And, for too long, social and education impact evaluators and researchers have stood outside programs and organizations, studying elements of their practice and its relationship to results, instead of inside or alongside, listening to the practitioners and those they serve to understand their definitions of success.

This first set of essays reshapes our perspective on evidence building. The authors, including Project Evident founder Kelly Fitzsimmons and founding board chair Archie Jones, former Harlem Children’s Zone evaluator Betina Jean-Louis and University of Pennsylvania economist Rebecca Maynard, a leader in the design and conduct of randomized controlled trials, share their journeys to practitioner-centered evidence building. They lift up the role of practitioners—public agencies, school districts, and non-profit organizations—that deliver social and educational services. And they describe ways and means to anchor studies in practitioner experience, loop

back to practitioners early and often with findings, and help practitioners build measurement capacity within their organizations to collect and analyze data in an ongoing manner to inform daily decision making. This is in striking contrast to relying primarily on the one-and-done approaches of periodic external evaluations, which too often deliver insights months or years after decisions need to be made.

Following their essays, you will find cases of practitioners in partnership with researchers, funders, and data scientists that have taken these methods to heart—workforce development nonprofit Year Up; maternal-child health nonprofit Nurse-Family Partnership; criminal justice nonprofit The Bail Project; Baltimore Public School District; and virtual technology training nonprofit Per Scholas—highlighting their approach to continuous evidence building and the results they have obtained.

Questions raised and addressed in this section include:

1. How is practitioner-centric evidence building different from traditional evaluation?
2. How can practitioner-centric evidence building lead to better, more meaningful, and equitable outcomes for communities?
3. How does practitioner-centric evidence building change the role and perspectives of communities, funders, researchers, and policymakers?