

### What is the community challenge?

Recent literature demonstrates the link between reading proficiency in the early elementary grades and high school dropout, with children who are not reading proficiently by the end of the third grade more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers (Fiester, 2010; 2013; Hernandez, 2011). Low-income children who are struggling readers are particularly disadvantaged with results indicating that they are less likely to complete high school than struggling readers from more affluent households (Hernandez, 2011). The Big Lift initiative grew out of this research demonstrating the importance of reading proficiently by the end of third grade (Fiester, 2010; 2013).

#### Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: The Big Lift

Intermediary/Subgrantee: Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Focus Area: Youth Development

Focus Population: Students (and their families) pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in 7 school districts.

Community Served: San Mateo County, CA

### What is the promising solution?

Launched in 2012, the Big Lift initiative aims to boost children's reading proficiency in San Mateo County through four different types of activities, called "pillars": (1) High quality preschool, (2) Summer Learning, (3) Attendance-reducing chronic absenteeism, and (4) Family Engagement. The Big Lift seeks to accomplish its goal of increasing third grade proficiency in San Mateo County by utilizing a collective impact approach. Collective impact is a process through which individuals and organizations from a diverse range of sectors commit to a common agenda for solving a complex problem (Preskill et al., 2014).

### What was the purpose of evaluation?

The purpose of this implementation study is to evaluate the following two research questions:

1. To what extent are community members engaging in collective impact?
2. How are the strategies for the four pillars being implemented?

The report discusses results from 2015, 2016, and 2017 including key informant interviews, a survey about collaboration (the Wilder Collaboration Factors Survey), and focus groups.

### What did the evaluation find?

As a grantee of the Social Innovation Fund, SVCF engaged an independent evaluator, RAND, to evaluate The Big Lift program. Key findings of the study are (Faxon-Mills et al., 2018, pg. vii – viii):

- Members of The Big Lift share a common vision and purpose, and the environment in San Mateo County is supportive and well suited for the level of collaboration needed to successfully implement a collective impact effort.
- Community leaders and partners were proud that the initiative was launched and pillar activities were occurring. Necessary organizations and key partners within and across school districts were mentioned as being in place to help achieve the common goal of raising third grade reading scores.
- Community leaders and partners mentioned issues with communication and the large workload of the increased data collection as initiative challenges. Local partners did note they appreciated the data support they received from community leaders.

- Financial sustainability of the initiative was the most frequently cited concern for The Big Lift community leaders and partners. Engaging local businesses and involving legislators were noted as possible avenues to gain further financial support.

## Notes on the evaluation

Initially, impact and implementation studies were planned, and an initial Level of Evidence (LOE) of moderate was targeted. Changes in funding status necessitated a shift to a purely implementation study and an LOE of preliminary was targeted instead. Data collected as part of the implementation study should not be viewed as representative of all The Big Lift stakeholders. Rather, results presented are from a sample of key members and leaders of the initiative. In some instances, for example the Wilder survey for the PPLC, recruitment did not yield a large sample, and so caution should be used when drawing conclusions from these data.

## How is The Big Lift using the evaluation findings to improve?

There are many recommendations presented in the report that Big Lift leaders may use to improve the initiative moving forward (Faxon-Mills et al., 2018, pgs. 33 – 35).

- First, several key informants noted that the initiative could benefit from a **director**.
- Second, along with a director for the overall initiative, findings indicate that placing emphasis on **filling key designated staff roles across the initiative** would benefit the work of the initiative and build capacity – especially at a local level.
- Third, a **long-term funding** strategy will be essential to the longevity and efficacy of The Big Lift initiative.
- Fourth, The Big Lift should set up and share a **central repository of key information** that collaborative partners can access.
- Fifth, the **backbone infrastructure should be clear** and transparent about which elements of each pillar are non-negotiable components of The Big Lift participation (and why) and which elements are open to local flexibility and tailoring.
- Sixth, findings indicate that The Big Lift could benefit from better articulating and communicating (to sites, parents, and teachers) a **policy** on admitting and (as applicable) supporting **special needs students** into its programs, and ensuring that there is adequate staff, training, and supports in place to accommodate that policy.
- Additionally, five recommendations were made for improving the summer program. These centered around hiring more qualified staff and having better preparation and curriculum for teachers, including better training on classroom management. The need for a system to handle special needs requirements was also discussed.

### Evaluation At-

Evaluation Design:  
Implementation Evaluation

Study Population:  
Students (and their families) pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in 7 school districts.

Evaluator:  
RAND

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence\*:  
Preliminary

\*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

The content of this brief was drawn from the full evaluation report submitted to CNCS by the grantee/subgrantee. The section of the brief that discusses evaluation use includes contribution of the grantee/subgrantee. All original content from the report is attributable to its authors.

To access the full evaluation report and learn more about CNCS, please visit <http://www.nationalservice.gov/research>.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.

Faxon-Mills, S., Whitaker, A. A., Cannon, J. S., Gomez, C. J., and Karoly, L. A. (2018). The Big Lift implementation study: Final Report. Santa Monica: CA. RR-2138. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2138.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2138.html)

Fiester, L. (2010). Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters. KIDS COUNT Special Report. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Fiester, L. (2013). Early warning confirmed: A research update on third-grade reading. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Hernandez, D. J. (2011). Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Preskill, H., Parkhurst, M., & Juster, J. S. (2014). Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact. <http://www.fsg.org/publications/guide-evaluating-collective-impact>