Self-Assessment of Place-Based Systems Change Efforts

This tool is one item in a suite of materials produced for the P-16 Community Investment initiative, a three-year learning engagement funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation across five communities (Buffalo, New York; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Dallas, Texas; the Rio Grande Valley, Texas; and Tacoma, Washington). The initiative seeks to understand and support the development of coherent, high-functioning, equity-centered, place-based systems that span all education sectors from cradle to career. Funders, practitioners, and other stakeholders interested in place-based systems change can use this tool in their work. It was developed by a team from Mathematica and Equal Measure, in collaboration with the foundation and its partners in the participating communities. Mathematica and Equal Measure serve as learning and evaluation partners in this effort.

Key terms used in this tool

Community: the place that is the locus of a systems change effort and the population in that place, which a collective effort or initiative is seeking to serve

Partnership: a place-based, multi-stakeholder effort or initiative working to improve outcomes in a community

Partner: an individual, organization, or institution that is a member of a partnership

Place-based: geographically specific, as defined by the partnership; the unit may be a neighborhood, a city or town, or a state or region, depending on the partnership

Systems change: shifting the conditions—including structures, practices, policies, resource flows, power dynamics, and mindsets—that produce societal problems and hold them in place; typically involves cross-sector collaboration among stakeholders from public, nonprofit, philanthropic, or private institutions, as well as community constituents

What is this tool?

This assessment is designed to help your partnership take a closer look at its areas of strength and areas where it can go deeper to effect place-based systems change. Though it draws from learning in cradle-to-career education, the assessment has application beyond that field. It can be used to examine multi-sector partnerships and collective efforts in areas such as health, transportation, and economic development.

The assessment is based on a community-level learning framework (Exhibit 1) that describes key components of mature systems change efforts.

Neither the assessment nor framework are intended to serve as a checklist for evaluating your partnership. While many systems change frameworks share similar components, this particular framework builds on existing knowledge by focusing on assessing components that have historically been underdeveloped in the literature. By mapping your partnership's efforts to these emergent components, the assessment serves as a companion tool for examining your partnership's level of readiness for true values-driven change.

Successful partnerships require strong guiding principles, system infrastructure, and organizational strategies and practices.

These are the three main conceptual categories of the framework. Each comprises a separate worksheet as part of the assessment. Individual components of each category serve as the topics (color-coded headers) within each worksheet. Partnerships and the systems they seek to change are complex in nature and inevitably change over time. Both may function well without necessarily achieving equal success across all components. The assessment serves as a way to conceptualize and unpack often overlooked components of systems change to help your partnership make sense of this complexity.

This context informs a partnership's principles, structures, strategies, and practices in different ways. Context shifts can themselves rebalance components that drive a partnership's success. Because context can implicate all dimensions of systems change, as you begin each assessment worksheet, we highlight specific contextual issues for you to consider about your community's past and present.
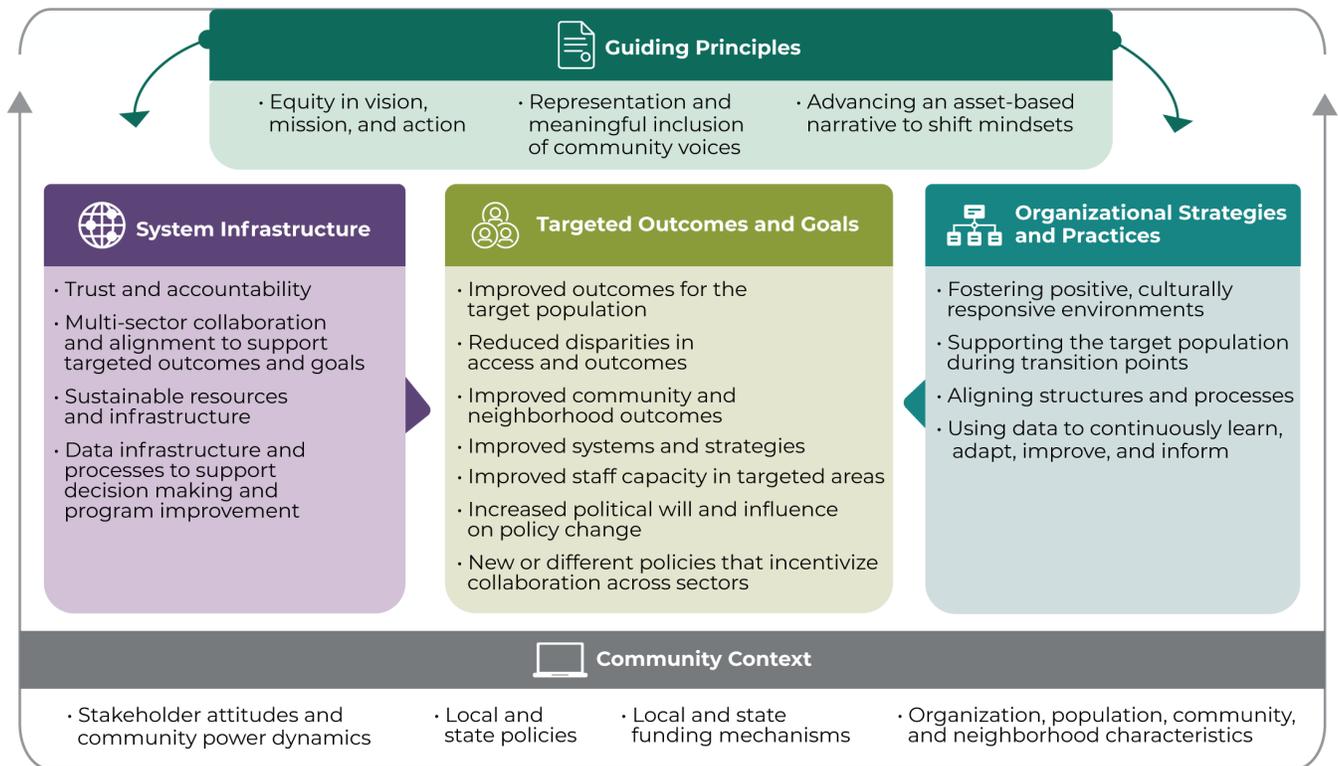
Targeted outcomes and goals, represented by the middle box of the framework that the conceptual categories feed into, are the partnership's short- and long-term goals for improving outcomes and reducing disparities. Some of the outcomes you could expect to see as a result of strengthening your partnership's principles, structures, strategies, and practices include:

Community context, represented by the gray outer rectangle that encompasses all conceptual categories in the framework, refers to the environment and existing conditions in which the partnership operates. This can include:

- Stakeholder attitudes and community power dynamics
- Local and state policies
- Local and state funding mechanisms
- Organization, population, community, and neighborhood characteristics, such as resource constraints, health and public safety, social cohesion, the physical environment, racial and economic segregation, participation of local policymakers, and barriers between partner organizations

- Improved outcomes for the target population
- Reduced disparities in access and outcomes
- Improved community and neighborhood outcomes
- Improved systems and strategies (for example, data systems and use, access to and allocation of resources or funding)
- Improved staff capacity in targeted areas (for example, equity principles, data use, policy advocacy, communications, fundraising, support services)
- Increased political will and influence on policy change
- New or different policies that incentivize collaboration across sectors

Exhibit 1. Community-level learning framework

Guiding Principles

- Equity in vision, mission, and action
- Representation and meaningful inclusion of community voices
- Advancing an asset-based narrative to shift mindsets

System Infrastructure

- Trust and accountability
- Multi-sector collaboration and alignment to support targeted outcomes and goals
- Sustainable resources and infrastructure
- Data infrastructure and processes to support decision making and program improvement

Targeted Outcomes and Goals

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- Improved systems and strategies
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Organizational Strategies and Practices

- Fostering positive, culturally responsive environments
- Supporting the target population during transition points
- Aligning structures and processes
- Using data to continuously learn, adapt, improve, and inform

Community Context

- Stakeholder attitudes and community power dynamics
- Local and state policies
- Local and state funding mechanisms
- Organization, population, community, and neighborhood characteristics

Who should use this tool?

The assessment is for any cross-sector systems change practitioner, funder, or technical assistance provider interested in examining a partnership's current strengths, areas for improvement, assets, and barriers. It can support decisions around upcoming investments, technical assistance needs, and site selection. It also codifies a cohesive framework for measuring place-based systems change efforts.

How does this tool work?

The ideal way to complete the assessment is as a group reflection and discussion exercise—that is, simultaneously with a variety of individuals and organizations working toward the same goal(s) in your community. The more sectors and viewpoints represented the better. At the end of this document, we provide sample questions to guide discussion. We acknowledge that it can be difficult to get everybody in the same room or video meeting all at once, so if completing the assessment together is not an option, we recommend that representatives from partner organizations each complete the assessment on their own time and come together at a later point to compare responses and share reflections.

We find that having a leader in the partnership serve as a moderator makes for a more productive discussion. For each worksheet, the moderator should work to determine whether there is a consensus in responses and, if not, draw out and address divergent perspectives across partners. This exercise is meant to ground a larger, ongoing discussion within your organization and partnership to collectively acknowledge what you are already doing well, determine areas of growth, and address challenges to successful systems change.

As you read each question (first column) and set of considerations (second column), go with your gut and answer honestly (third column). The considerations provide specific examples and guidance to help you contextualize, reflect on, and weigh where your partnership stands for each question. All questions ask you to consider the extent to which an effort or practice occurs. As you read and discuss the question and considerations, select the option that best reflects the current characteristics and dynamics of your partnership. Because the assessment is meant for continuous improvement, you should revisit and retake it as often as needed.

Worksheet I: Guiding Principles (*Questions 1–5*)

Guiding principles are the fundamental assumptions about how changes to different system components, strategies, and practices are most likely to lead to a partnership's chosen outcomes and goals. A partnership's guiding principles reflect the members' shared values and beliefs about how to solve an important social problem at scale.

As you go through the Guiding Principles worksheet, be sure to consider (and discuss, if applicable) the following contextual issues:

- Your community's history with respect to racial or ethnic discrimination and segregation

- Your partnership's history and philosophy with respect to community engagement in defining problems and finding solutions

- The ability and willingness of community members to recognize and address the root causes of current disparities

- The presence and relative prominence of different groups facing disparities in the area of the partnership's work

- Your community's history of collaboration around community agendas, including established norms, relationships, and trust

Question	Considerations		Answer		
Equity in vision, mission, and action					
1. To what extent does the partnership have an equity statement or goal?	**An equity statement or goal should:** · Be clear and achievable · Be mutually agreed upon by members · Be developed with or by members of the community who are most impacted by the partnership's work · Define a target population bounded by geography and linked to a solvable societal problem	· Address disparities experienced by the target population related to race/ethnicity and poverty status · Reflect an understanding of root causes of inequity in the community · Apply to the work of all partners · Be supported by an action plan (see question #2)	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
2. To what extent does the partnership have a concrete and comprehensive plan to improve outcomes and provide targeted support for universal achievement?	**An action plan should include the following steps:** · Develop strategies · Design internal processes and structures · Determine necessary tasks · Engage partners	· Establish evaluation methods · Specify benchmarks or other accountability measures to track progress · Monitor progress · Track outcomes · Expand partnership opportunities	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
Representation and meaningful inclusion of community voices					
3. To what extent does the partnership employ practices that engage individuals and groups who have been structurally left out of the conversation?	**Consider these practices for engagement:** · Hold meetings at convenient times and locations · Provide bilingual interpretation and translation for meetings and documents · Provide transportation	· Provide child care · Compensate individuals for their time and expertise · Create a space to listen to community voices that do not belong to partners	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
4. To what extent do individuals most directly impacted by the partnership's work contribute to making decisions related to shared goals or plans?	**Consider whether community members, particularly those most proximate to the issue(s):** · Participate in key partnership activities · Sit on committees or working groups · Vote on or veto decisions · Recommend or set discussion topics	· Co-develop solutions to improve outcomes · Develop and execute strategies · Complete needs assessments · Provide input before programs or services are initiated · Voice feedback through clear mechanisms	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
Advancing an asset-based narrative to shift mindsets					
5. To what extent does the partnership advance an asset-based narrative about the target population to shift mindsets in the community?	**Consider whether the partnership:** · Obtains and publicizes data to show what the community can gain by reducing disparities for the target population · Centers the target population's strengths, resources, and assets in its messaging	· Works to dispel myths or stereotypes about the target population · Employs intentional strategies to operationalize diversity, equity, and inclusion values within organizations, across the partnership, and in the community. Examples include root cause analysis, reconciliation work, and staff capacity building.	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**

Worksheet II: System Infrastructure (*Questions 6–11*)

System infrastructure refers to the organizational structures and processes of the partnership that are necessary for implementing the shared agenda.

As you go through the System Infrastructure worksheet, be sure to consider (and discuss, if applicable) the following contextual issues:

- Your community's governmental and philanthropic dynamics

- Your community's history of data use and systems development related to the area of the partnership's work

- Your partnership's history and philosophy with respect to leadership, collaboration, and sustainability

Question	Considerations		Answer		
Trust and accountability					
6. To what extent do partners trust and hold each other accountable for implementing activities as planned?	**Consider whether partners:** · Have formal accountability measures or agreements, such as performance scorecards, outcome progress reports, bylaws, rules of behavior, and job descriptions	· Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities that balance credit with accountability · Commit to and follow through on action steps · Openly discuss conflicts between each other's organizations	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
Multi-sector collaboration and alignment to support targeted outcomes and goals					
7. To what extent do the partnership's structures and processes facilitate active and genuine partner engagement?	**Consider:** · Whether there are working groups, committees, and action networks to carry out vision-aligned work · How, how often, and for what purpose(s) partners meet	· Whether meetings facilitate knowledge sharing, problem solving, team building, and decision making · Whether subgroups meet to target specific objectives or deliverables and whether they report back to the partnership	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
Sustainable resources and infrastructure					
8. To what extent does the partnership have committed, diverse, and sustained funding sources and other resources?	**Consider whether the partnership:** · Maintains a balance of specific funding sources that includes local, state, and federal; public, private, and philanthropic sources · Has partners who contribute time, funds, and expertise	· Develops budgets with advance knowledge of where the money will come from · Funds programmatic and relationship-building activities directly · Has funds to innovate above and beyond the current work it is already doing successfully	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
9. To what extent does the partnership invest in, build, and maintain the capacity of partners?	**Consider whether the partnership:** · Offers cohesive, regular, and relevant training and professional development opportunities · Visits and learns from partnerships in other communities	· Works with community experts, professional development consultants, or technical assistance providers with expertise in equity principles	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
Data infrastructure and processes to support decision making and program improvement					
10. To what extent are there established norms and cohesive systems for data collection, management, and reporting across partner organizations?	**Consider whether the partnership has:** · A performance management process · Clear data-sharing memoranda of understanding or agreements across sectors and key entities · Developed data goals through a community planning process informed by input from various stakeholders · A data modeling and visualization expert to help develop community data tools	· Protocols for defining, collecting, storing, analyzing, and reporting data within and across organizations · A sophisticated database · The ability to link data across organizations and sectors and disaggregate data from multiple sources · Ongoing opportunities to review data through facilitated conversations with partners	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
11. To what extent does the parnership use data well for strategy refinement and continuous quality improvement?	**Consider whether the partnership:** · Articulates goals for the development or refinement of data systems and reporting activities · Identifies a set of clearly defined key metrics and revises existing data collection and storage methods to include these metrics · Uses data for measurement and evaluation purposes	· Obtains and uses data that are timely, meaningful, relevant, sensitive to change, and targeted to a goal · Shapes and adapts programs or strategies based on available data · Tracks and communicates progress toward targeted outcomes through performance scorecards	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**

Worksheet III: Organizational Strategies and Practices

(*Questions 12–15*)

Organizational strategies and practices are the actions that participating organizations take to implement the shared agenda and achieve targeted outcomes.

As you go through the Organizational Strategies and Practices worksheet, be sure to consider (and discuss, if applicable) the following contextual issues:

- Your partnership's past and current efforts to elevate anti-racism as a core dimension of its organizational strategies

- Your partnership's past and current efforts to use inclusionary, asset-based practices and metrics

- Your partnership's history of celebrating and elevating "wins" to maintain momentum for equity-focused systemic work

Question	Considerations		Answer		
Fostering positive, culturally responsive environments					
12. To what extent does the partnership promote and support positive and culturally responsive learning environments and supports?	**Consider whether the partnership:** · Expects partners to regularly spend time in the local community · Analyzes disaggregated data to understand target population disparities (such as gaps in services), strengths, resources, and assets	· Involves a range of culturally relevant community partners in developing and executing programs and strategies	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
Supporting the target population during transition points					
13. To what extent does the partnership support the target population during transition points across a continuum?	**Consider whether the partnership:** · Supports activities at and across transition points in a continuum · Tracks exit and entrance criteria across transition points	· Engages with direct service providers to better understand target population needs during transition points · Regularly shares data between organizations about the target population's needs during transition points	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
Aligning structures and processes					
14. To what extent do partners collaborate across transition points to align structures and build a shared understanding of expectations and skills needed for success across sectors?	**Consider whether partners:** · Understand accountability structures in each sector · Maintain clear and consistent communication with leaders and frontline staff in each sector	· Measure success on standardized metrics across sectors for quality improvement	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**
Using data to continuously learn, adapt, improve, and inform					
15. To what extent do partners regularly use data to improve outcomes and achieve stated goals?	**Consider whether partners:** · Openly discuss progress on shared goals based on data · Regularly collect, maintain, and reference data · Use data to facilitate program improvements	· Regularly train staff on how to use data · Empower frontline staff to regularly use data to make decisions about services	☐ **Not at all**	☐ **Some**	☐ **A Lot**

What now?

Below we offer sample discussion questions to help you and other partners debrief on responses provided in the assessment. There are no right or wrong answers; these questions are meant to guide discussion and reflection among those who completed the assessment (either individually or as a group).

1. Which questions stood out to you? Why?

2. Which questions were easier or more difficult to answer? Why?

3. In each of the three worksheets (Guiding Principles, Systems Infrastructure, and Organizational Strategies and Practices), do you notice any trends in your answers? If you completed the worksheets as individual organizations, compare your organization's answers with those of another partner organization. Do you notice any trends across your answers? Where do your answers converge? Diverge?

4. Based on your responses, what assets and resources do you think your partnership relies on the most? What could be stronger?

5. Components are the topics (color-coded headers in green, purple, and teal) within each of the three assessment worksheets. Taken together, components form the three main conceptual categories of the community-level learning framework. On which components are you most proud of your partnership's work to date?

6. Which components are you most concerned about? Are there particular barriers or challenges preventing the partnership from being successful with the given components?

7. Which components are you most excited or curious to learn more about?

8. What will you take away from this assessment based on your answers and explanations? What should the partnership take away?

9. What are three short-term action items your partnership can engage in to strengthen its principles, structures, strategies, or practices?

10. What are three long-term action items your partnership can engage in to strengthen its principles, structures, strategies, or practices?

Acknowledgements

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