

El Monte Community Building Initiative: Reflections of a Decade (2007-2016) *A Final Evaluation Report*

Executive Summary

What is the El Monte Community Building Initiative (CBI)?

The El Monte Community Building Initiative (CBI) was launched in 2007 as part of the Neighborhood Revitalization funding strategy at the California Community Foundation that focused initially on affordable housing and community revitalization. At the time, CCF leadership recognized that, in order to see measurable impact in an underserved community, the Foundation needed to invest in a community for a longer time period, rather than traditional grantmaking that goes from year to year. During the initial years, the initiative suffered from trying to do too much, resulting in a lack of focus and scattered results. Staff turnover at CCF was also a challenge in building trusting relationships with community collaborators. In late 2009, CCF assigned Vera de Vera (Director, Community Building Initiative) and Frank Molina (Program Manager) to right the course. Under their leadership and with substantial community engagement, the CBI sharpened its focus on improving health and education access for young people in El Monte. Since 2010, the CBI created the most momentum around building an education pipeline to college for all through a Collective Impact framework¹. This is the area where the community has achieved the most success.

Using the Collective Impact framework, the El Monte CBI represents a break from traditional grantmaking. Traditional grantmaking usually involves making grant investments to discreet organizations for specific interventions to a defined target population that likely result in only limited impact on the broader community. In Collective Impact, funders create a space where actors from different sectors come together to decide to pursue a common agenda and mobilize and leverage the unique strengths and assets of each partner in order to improve system practices that could benefit everyone that system serves. In this case, the funder does not only fund discrete interventions, but also invests in facilitation, coaching, and capacity building.

Why did CBI focus on education access?

The early years of community engagement revealed some hard truths about this community. Parents and youth have high education aspirations, but the education system was not

¹ The Collective Impact framework provides a useful way to plan and implement initiatives that “are long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Their actions are supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization.” For more information on the Collective Impact framework, see “Collective Impact” by John Kania & Mark Kramer, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2011: http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact.

serving everyone. Only a handful of “lucky few” made it to college each year. On the other hand, a group of homegrown leaders, now college graduates, have returned to El Monte to become educators and mentors for the next generation. They founded El Monte Coalition of Latino Professionals (emCLP). Some emCLP members even rose through the ranks to become superintendents and school board members. With some initial CBI investments, the three school districts serving El Monte, which had not had a lot of history of working together, began to look at how to better support the large number of English Learners in their schools. The high school district, in particular, had been planning a pipeline called the El Monte Pledge to Rio Hondo College (the local community college), Cal State LA, and UC Irvine; the partners were very interested in building out the pipeline to the elementary and middle school grades served by the other two school districts. CCF saw an opportunity to use the CBI as a vehicle to harness all these positive energies.

How have young people’s chances of going to college improved under CBI?

Using the 2010 data (pre-El Monte Pledge) as a baseline, there has been convincing evidence that young people in El Monte are becoming more college-ready.

- The high school graduation rate increased from 84.8% in 2010, to 85.6% in 2012 and 86.3% in 2014.
- The proportion of high school students who completed A-G requirements also increased from 36.5% in 2010 to 41.0% in 2012 and 44.3% in 2014.
- The number of high school students who completed at least 1 AP course increased 27.4% between 2010 and 2012, and another 2.8% between 2012 and 2014.

Community assessment during the early years of the CBI revealed that many students were languishing in English Learner status for years, which stalled their progress to become college-ready. Therefore, a key strategy during those years aimed to fix the system to better identify, support, and track English Learners across the three school districts. Since 2010, over 6,200 English Learners have been reclassified, making them more available to take A-G requirement courses. The number of English Learners reclassified jumped 38.5% between 2010 and 2012. The increase was even more dramatic at the two school districts serving the elementary and middle school grades. It is likely that the reclassification also helped overall improvement of student performance in language arts at the elementary and middle school levels. More students were scoring “Advanced/Proficient” in the STAR English Language Arts test in 2012 than in 2010.

All of this translated into higher college enrollment. As the table below demonstrates, in 2010, slightly over half of graduating seniors (50.7%) were enrolled in a 2-year or a 4-year college. That percentage jumped to 55.1% in 2012 and 61.2% in 2014. Between 2010 and 2012, the percentage of graduating seniors enrolled in Rio Hondo College, as part of the El Monte Pledge, increased from 16.4% to 27.3%. The other higher education partners of the Pledge also saw a similar increase during this time period, including 3.0% to 4.3% for Cal State LA and 1.3% to 3.1% for UC Irvine.

Table 1. College Enrollment of Graduating Seniors at EMUHSD (2010, 2012, 2014)

El Monte High School District Students entering in Fall	Fall 2010		Fall 2012		Fall 2014	
Total number of graduating seniors:	1,888		1,976		1,982	
To Rio Hondo College	309	16.4%	539	27.3%	364	18.4%
To Cal State LA	57	3.0%	84	4.3%	115	5.8%
To UC Irvine	25	1.3%	69	3.5%	62	3.1%
To other 2-year	332	17.6%	174	8.8%	425	21.4%
To other 4-year	235	12.4%	223	11.3%	247	12.4%
Total	958	50.7%	1,089	55.1%	1,213	61.2%

Source: Center for Educational Partnership, UC Irvine (2016)

Once in college, El Monte Pledge students tended to do better than their peers. Rio Hondo College students from El Monte, for instance, demonstrated a higher persistence² rate and transfer readiness³ than a comparison group. About 43% of El Monte Pledge students entering in 2011 and 22% entering in 2012 at Rio Hondo College completed a certificate or an associate’s degree, and/or were transfer ready, compared to 21% and 9%, respectively, from the comparison group.

As explained later in the executive summary, the CBI, under the Collective Impact framework, promoted system improvement and culture change that led to these outcomes.

How will the community sustain these results now that the CBI is coming to a close?

There are strong indications that the work started under the CBI will continue beyond the initiative:

(1) With the education focus, the El Monte Promise Foundation (EMPF) is able to collaborate with education systems, community partners, and parents and youth to continue this work after CBI. EMPF includes emCLP members who have been leading the charge for educational reforms in El Monte as well as leaders from the school districts, including superintendents and school board members, and higher education partners. For instance, the partner from Rio Hondo College chairs EMPF’s Data Committee, and all the partners have signed data sharing agreement so that the Committee could better track educational progress of the community through all grade levels and develop benchmarks for the future.

(2) The latest strategic initiatives from EMPF aim to tackle the last barrier for parents in El Monte to send their children to college, by making college more accessible for the many low-income families in this community. EMPF established a Scholars Savings program to encourage parents to open a savings account for their children as early as possible. To

² Persistence Rate refers to being enrolled in three consecutive semesters

³ Transfer Readiness refers to having completed courses that allow them to transfer to a CSU or UC

promote a culture of savings, EMPF has piloted a financial literacy curriculum with parents and students.

(3) The two elementary school districts especially have shown a high level of commitment to the collaboration in these strategic initiatives by institutionalizing these strategic initiatives as part of their system. The financial literacy curriculum was developed by teachers and is aligned with Common Core standards, and EMPF made a strategic decision to train teachers to deliver this curriculum in the classroom, instead of hiring external consultants. The school districts allocated some of its LCFF (local control funding formula) dollars to hire additional community liaisons to promote the Scholars Saving program and other EMPF programming. This responsibility has been formally written into the job description of these community liaisons. To replace the CBI funding that has supported the English Learners in the past, the school districts are also using LCFF funding to bring in evidence-based English Language Development programs to make sure English Learners can catch up quickly and become college-ready.

From the CBI experience, what has made this effort successful?

CCF staff and EMPF leaders have found the Collective Impact framework helpful in explaining CBI's success in improving readiness and access to high education for young people in El Monte. This framework recognizes that large-scale and sustainable changes can only happen when different sectors work together; conversely, isolated interventions of individual organizations, a typical funding strategy from many foundations, will yield only scattered results. Collective Impact calls for community and system partners to be collaborators towards the same outcomes, and not competitors for limited resources.

The Collective Impact framework includes five essential components: (1) *common agenda*, which requires partners to have “a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon action; (2) *mutually reinforcing activities*, which requires “a diverse group of stakeholders working together...by encouraging each participate to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others”; (3) continuous communication, which is to foster trust among diverse partners by “building up enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different efforts” so that “decisions will be made on the basis of objective evidence and the best possible solution to the problem, not to favor the priorities of one organization over another”; (4) shared measurement, which includes “collecting data and measuring results consistently on a short list of indicators...across all participating organization to ensure all efforts remain aligned and enable participants to hold each other accountable and learn from each other’s successes and failures”; and (5) backbone organization, which is an independent coordinating entity “who can plan, manage, and support the initiative...in order to focus people’s attention and create a sense of urgency.”

The educational partners of the CBI not only embody these five essential components of the Collective Impact framework, but in many cases they have also deepened each component over the years.

(1) **Common Agenda:** The vision of El Monte embracing a college-going culture for all youth was echoed in our interviews not only with EMPF and school district leaders, but it was articulated by parents, by Community Based Organization (CBO) staff by capacity building consultants, and by funders. This vision was also reflected in local business interests.

(2) **Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** The latest strategic initiatives from EMPF provide excellent examples of this essential component. Different stakeholders are mobilizing their unique strengths to make college affordable to all families. Business leaders are talking to local business owners to contribute matches to the Scholars Savings accounts. Parents are promoting the value of saving to their peers. School districts released their teachers to develop a financial literacy curriculum and hired community liaisons to market the EMPF programs. Even community partners focusing on health try to encourage young people to go to college by providing mentoring and extracurricular activities that would bolster their college applications. The vision of a college-going culture is felt throughout a young person's life.

(3) **Continuous Communication:** CBI has provided a space for school district leaders to communicate, make collective decisions and act in concert. EMPF continues to provide this convening space for these and other leaders. The result is the ability to expedite ideas into action more quickly and in a more coordinated fashion. Christina Davila, EMPF's Program Manager, said, "To be able to create a [financial literacy] curriculum in a summer and pilot it in 10 schools all within a year, I think, is amazing. To get school districts to agree to give you in-class instruction is amazing...Making it part of their [community liaisons'] responsibility to implement EMPF initiatives is a testament of school district leadership really prioritizing this collective work and understanding the potential impact it can have five, ten years down the line."

(4) **Shared Measurement:** The educational partners of this effort have recently signed data sharing agreements to be better able to track the progress of different academic indicators throughout all the educational segments. With this data, the EMPF Data Committee is in the process of developing an El Monte scorecard, with benchmarks for key grade levels. Moving forward, this will allow EMPF to conduct evaluation and to develop more responsive strategies in areas where the community is not meeting its benchmark.

(5) **Backbone Organization:** In the last few years of the initiative, EMPF has emerged as an independent and grassroots organization in El Monte to assume the backbone organization functions that have often been performed by CCF staff in the initiative's early years. CCF has hired capacity building consultants to help fortify EMPF's organizational development. These consultants have worked with EMPF on strategic planning, board development, fundraising and grantwriting, community assessment, parent engagement, and program design.

So Collective Impact worked. But is it enough to sustain the gains the community has made?

The Collective Impact framework focuses on influencing systems and their decision-makers. CCF and the CBI partners understand that, in a community that is predominantly immigrants unfamiliar with navigating these systems, improving systems is not going to be enough. A decade of CBI has shown that building a pathway to college is not just about fixing a system, but there needs to be a parallel process of changing the culture.

Since El Monte has not had a long history of grassroots activism, the early years of the CBI focused on community engagement that sought input from parents and residents through telephone surveys and community forums. For community members to take a more active role, CCF funded some organizations to do skill-building projects with parents as well as contracted Center for Community Engagement at CSU Long Beach to conduct a Community Scholars Program for residents to build their leadership skills. For a couple years, CCF made mini-grants for some of the program graduates to complete community projects they proposed. Some of these program graduates even formed their own group (*Lideres Comunitarios para un Mejor El Monte*, or Community Leaders for a Better El Monte). This group has held community forums that attracted up to 100 people in attendance, sometimes including local superintendents and elected officials.

In the same vein, the school districts began to provide more opportunities for parents to work alongside with teachers and school staff to plan school events. Early on in its organizational life, EMPF established the Parent Advisory Committee and included parents on its board of directors. With each successive year in CBI, parents and community members went from giving their input, to actually implementing programs and events and outreaching to their peers. EMPF mobilized parents to turn out in numbers at a key school board meeting recently to demonstrate their strengths.

CBI stakeholders believe that civic participation is key to promoting a college-going culture because the grassroots activism from more and more parents is an illustration to their children and other parents and families that higher education is not only desirable, but also attainable for the community. They generate excitement in the community in ways that are not possible by other leaders. As Elvy Perez, a parent leader on the EMPF's board of directors, said, "Education has become viral."

What has CCF learned from the El Monte CBI?

The success of this place-based initiative, as CCF staff learned, is contingent on the foundation sharing power with the community. Initially, this required a lot of due diligence to uncover what the community needed and would get behind, as well as building relationships with those in the community who could move this agenda.

Sharing power meant having some flexibility for the community to pursue their interest and not imposing a "rigid framework" on the initiative. External stakeholders observed that the CCF approach is more collaborative, compared to other foundations conducting place-based initiatives, which are more likely "to keep the decision-making around resources very much in the hands of their program officers." As Claire Robinson, Managing Director of Amigos de los Rios,

one of the early CBI grantees, observed, “CCF has been very subtle. They are not heavy-handed. They let things evolve the way they will in a democracy.”

To avoid being funder-driven, CCF staff had to see themselves beyond the role of traditional grantmakers and convince community partners that they were more than just a funding source, so that they would collaborate instead of compete against each other.

One of the “non-traditional” funder’s roles was that of a capacity builder. On the community level, CCF invested in leadership development of parents and community members through a variety of ways that included formal training, one-on-one coaching, and providing or advocating for opportunities for grassroots members to practice the leadership skills they learned. On the organizational level, CCF deployed organizational development experts to school districts and community-based organizations on areas such as strategic planning, board development, fundraising and grantwriting, community assessment, parent engagement, and program design.

As the partners began to establish a track record of success, CCF played the role of their champion to connect them with other funders. Having CCF as an imprimatur was a significant factor for other funders to decide to invest in El Monte.

These roles require skills different from a traditional program officer. In fact, both Vera de Vera and Frank Molina were selected more because of their experience in maneuvering political structures and community relations. Molina also brought a lot of lived experience in El Monte that was essential to working with both institutional and grassroots leaders in the city. His cultural competence made it easier to build bridges even among people who had not worked with each other before.

Finally, was the impact from CBI broader than what occurred in El Monte?

The story of the El Monte CBI may be coming to a close, but the work is living on. The partners are reporting some promising outcomes, especially in education achievements and access. The system, culture and infrastructure in El Monte are likely to sustain these outcomes in the future. Through the different activities it supported in the last decade, the initiative has elevated El Monte both in California and across the nation.

- Shelly Spiegel Coleman recounted the work Californians Together did with the school districts on English learners raised the visibility of this issue and changed how the state works with this population. Their definition of what a long-term English learner was adopted by the state, and the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) asks the states to report the number of students who have been English learners for more than five years “because of what we’ve created funded by CBI.”
- Claire Robinson of Amigos de los Rios shared that the El Monte General Plan, with its inclusion of health and wellness as well as cultural heritage, was acknowledged by both the Environmental Protection Agency and National Parks Service as examples of “how to start making good choices in very disadvantaged communities with the burden of pollution that bring back and protect water and air resources and cultural heritage. It’s a huge example that people are using across the country.”

- In 2015, White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics selected the El Monte Promise Foundation as a “Bright Spot” for being “a shining example” in increasing college access to Latino students. For this honor, Lilian Maldonado French, Maribel Garcia and Norma Garcia were invited to the White House to network with funders and other awardees. Having already some success with some funders for its Scholars Savings Program (like Citibank), Norma Garcia believed that this would give the program even more “access to national corporate dollars.”

Furthermore, we believe the experience and success of this initiative offer important and on-the-ground insights to the broader philanthropic community that is implementing Collective Impact framework. CBI reaffirms the five essential components of the framework in achieving sustainable system change. CBI also shows that ongoing civic engagement is necessary to sustain any systemic change when the political climate presents a setback to any community gains. A more nuanced application of the Collective Impact framework would require the backbone organization to learn when to be a neutral party to build bridges across sectors and when to take a leadership role in countering opposing forces.

How can CCF apply lessons learned from CBI to future initiatives?

Throughout the implementation CBI, the actions that worked well and the course corrections provide insights and lessons that can be applied to future initiatives.

- **Flexibility and willingness to adapt:** Often cited as an important component of CBI’s success was CCF’s ability to pause, reflect and change course as needed. This was especially true in the early years of the initiative. What made CBI unique, is that CCF listened to what community members were interested in focusing on (education) and used that wisdom to focus the direction of the initiative. Future initiatives may benefit by having periods of reflection and intentional changes in strategic direction that are informed by the communities where they are being implemented. It will also be important to clearly communicate to all stakeholders to rationale for change in direction to ensure continued buy-in.
- **Deep understanding of local history, politics and culture:** CBI was an example of a community initiative that was meaningful to local stakeholders in part because it was relevant within the current political, cultural and historical landscape. Having CCF leadership who were deeply familiar with El Monte and community organizing (e.g., de Vera and Molina) allowed the foundation to understand how best to support this initiative without over-stepping as funder. Regardless of the community, other initiatives will need to ensure that local contexts are integrated in meaningful ways. This may include hiring program staff who are from specific communities.
- **Local leaders:** El Monte has a history of community members returning to El Monte to assume civic leadership positions. CBI was successful in part because the strategies were able to align in ways that supported these local leaders and promoted community benefit. In places where local leadership is lacking, it will be important to

develop the capacity of locals who have leadership potential. In other communities where local leaders are returning, initiatives can be strengthened by working with these leaders to develop and implement strategies that are essential for their communities.