



# COLLEGE FOR ALL:

Stories of Collective Impact in the  
***El Monte Community Building Initiative  
(CBI)***

June 2014



## Introduction:

### College for All

Thriving as a student in El Monte has been challenging for years. The advancement of students is hindered by language, poverty, immigrant status, and thwarted by systemic issues such as limited resources and the absence of a unified school district. Despite this, students in El Monte are showing advances in recent years that haven't been experienced in generations.

Data from Rio Hondo College shows a doubling of El Monte students enrolling at the college over two years and higher persistence and retention rates for El Monte students. This isn't a chance occurrence. Norma Garcia, board president of the El Monte Promise Foundation (EMPF), explained, "One of the things that we really wanted to do was work with youth and build a pipeline to college. We thought that was something missing in El Monte." Like many leaders and stakeholders involved in the El Monte Community Building Initiative (CBI), a ten-year place-based initiative from the California Community Foundation (CCF), Garcia's aspiration for El Monte has come from an intimate knowledge of what it is like to grow up in this city and become a first-generation college student in her family. CBI leaders don't just want to increase the number of individual students attending college, they want to turn El Monte into a "college-going town" by eliminating the cultural and systemic barriers that make it challenging for students to attend college. Another CBI leader and former student in El Monte, Mayor Andre Quintero stated, "College should be the expected norm. They should have the support services and wraparound services they need, so parents don't have to fear asking questions and kids don't have to be the pioneers."

### The Road to Collective Impact

CBI's success is the result of passionate individuals who chose to become change agents in the city they grew up in. Originally launched in 2007, in recent years the initiative has undergone an evolution to focus the collective energy of the community. It included people like Norma Garcia and Andre Quintero, who left El Monte for college and came back to assume leadership roles in city government and school districts, as well as students, parents, community members, staff from local schools and community-based organizations, and even college administrators. Initially CBI had funded projects on affordable housing, health, education, workforce development and community engagement as silo strategies. The project's expansive goals were further hindered by CCF staff turnover. By late 2009, the lack of progress had frustrated leadership in both the Foundation and the community.



Then, in early 2010, a confluence of events led the CBI back on the road toward collective action. CCF assigned Vera de Vera to be the director and Frank Molina (another son of El Monte) as the program manager for the initiative. "That was the year when CBI could collapse or prosper," says Mayor Quintero, who credits CCF staffing changes for helping them to "calibrate and put it in the right direction." Both staff have stayed on in

their respective position to this day. Shortly after, a process and outcome evaluation<sup>1</sup> of the initiative reiterated the need for refining the focus for CBI.



The El Monte Pledge Compact was established in August 2010. Based on discussions held over one year earlier, Rio Hondo College (the community college that enrolled many students from El Monte) led this initiative in collaboration with El Monte Union High School District and UC Irvine, giving the students in El Monte a seamless pathway from high school to college by providing students priority registration into the colleges involved in the initiative. California State University, Los Angeles, also joined the Pledge in 2011. In order to take advantage of the one-time priority registration, students must meet graduation requirements, maintain a 3.0 grade point average, and be eligible for college admission.

In fall 2010, CCF commissioned Dr. Julie Mendoza to conduct an inventory and assessment<sup>2</sup> of existing educational assets and gaps in El Monte. The findings confirmed a common theme that stakeholders had expressed in earlier community planning sessions – a concern for the community’s children and youth, especially their prospects for higher education.

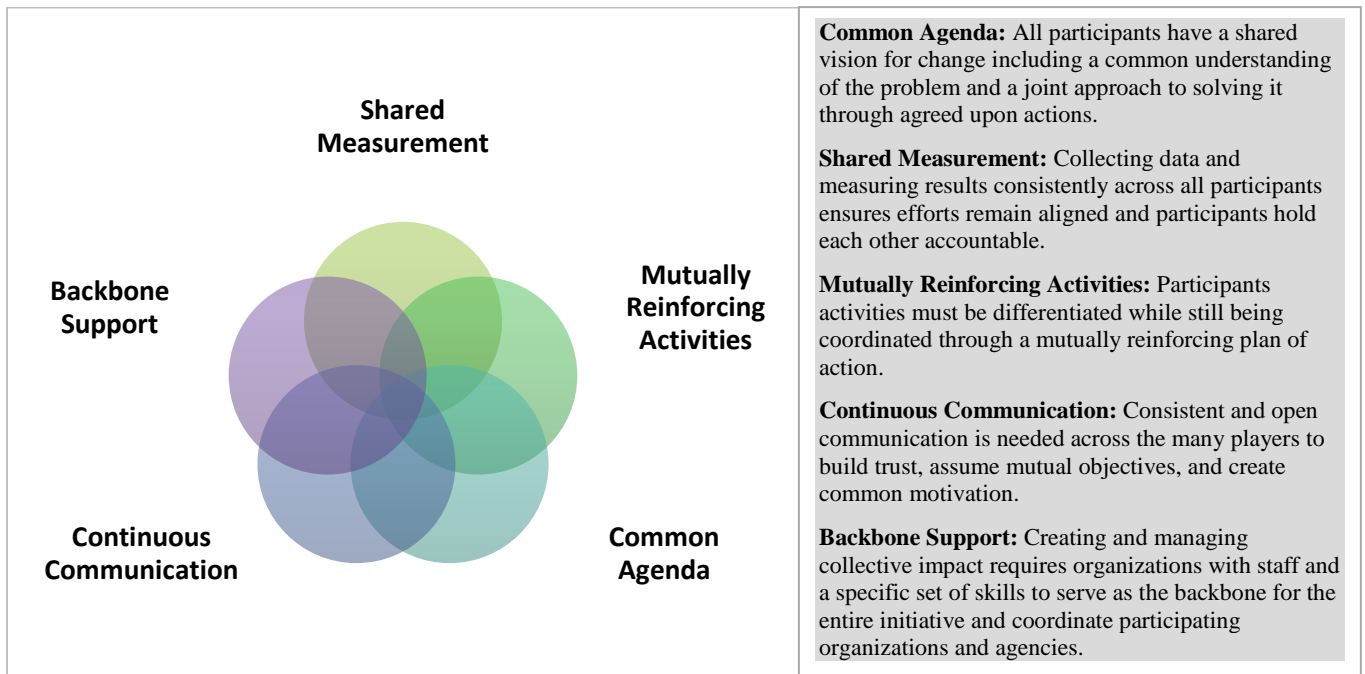
In late 2011, after reviewing the findings and recommendations of Dr. Mendoza’s report, the concept of establishing a nonprofit educational foundation began formalizing a collective body to further eliminate

<sup>1</sup> Special Services for Groups, “El Monte Building Community Initiative: Outcomes Evaluation Report”, October 2011

<sup>2</sup> Julie Mendoza, “A Pledge and a Promise: Building a Seamless Pathway to College for El Monte Students and Families”, Nov. 11, 2011

obstacles between students and establish a pathway to college. Founded as a project of Community Partners in late 2012, the El Monte Promise Foundation (EMPF) is comprised of parents, community members, El Monte City Elementary and Mountain View Elementary School Districts, as well as the El Monte Coalition of Latino Professionals, and the California Community Foundation – stakeholders that had been convened through the CBI. Though the goals of EMPF and the El Monte Pledge Compact are complementary, both bring different sets of resources to the table. By the time of its public launch in March 2014, the partners of the El Monte Promise Foundation endorsed education as a strategy for development in El Monte.

The California Community Foundation convened the CBI Advisory Committee for a strategic review retreat in April 2012 to introduce the idea of collective impact. The leaders recognized that much of what they had planned to accomplish together was already aligned with the five core components of collective impact. Collective impact then became the framework with which they could define and articulate their strategic directions in building the road for children in El Monte toward academic success.



As a result of this shared vision, the Initiative seeks to increase the engagement of residents in raising awareness of and working together on building a college-going culture and improving children’s health resulting in:

- Improving school, college and career readiness; and
- Reducing rates of childhood obesity, improving levels of student physical fitness and access to affordable health care for children.

These outcomes are more organic and realistic because CBI combined, leveraged, and expanded local efforts underway. CCF staff explains, “the outcomes that children were healthy and better prepared for school and college aren’t necessarily the Foundation’s outcomes. Those are the community’s outcomes, because that is

what they want to pursue. Those are going to be the community's outcomes even after we are long gone." This will be the result of having done collective impact. CCF sees itself as simply having convened existing needs.

The new direction also represented a significant shift in the role of the California Community Foundation from grant-maker to convener. Instead of funding discrete projects, CCF poured resources into building the capacity and infrastructure, particularly for El Monte Promise Foundation that has allowed CBI leaders in growing their vision. Sometimes it did so by bringing expertise like Dr. Mendoza to the community. Mostly, it created a space for people who had not had a history of collaboration to plan and act together. Having built much needed sustainability in the past few years, CCF began to set the stage to allow EMPF to take the role as the backbone organization in the final years of this Initiative and beyond.

## The El Monte Coalition of Latino Professionals

The idea of improving the lives of children in El Monte did not begin in 2006, when the California Community Foundation decided to invest up to \$1 million over 10 years to improve the quality of life for lower-income residents through the El Monte Community Building Initiative (CBI). For many, the journey was already underway and had begun years before.

Many of the members of the El Monte Promise Foundation (EMPF) grew up and went to school in El Monte. Long before there was an EMPF, some of the members formed the El Monte Coalition of Latino Professionals (emCLP). It had started in the early nineties as an informal group of friends having breakfast on Sundays to provide peer support for themselves as first-generation college students (and now professionals). Their experiences growing up in El Monte were fundamentally impacted by having immigrant parents with limited education. Despite not having help in navigating the school system, all of them graduated from college, and in most cases, pursued graduate degrees. As Norma Garcia explained, "I wasn't destined or nurtured to go to college. I just got there. It was not part of a system or an institution. My parents were supportive, but there was nothing else there but support. I was first generation."

When emCLP held its first *tamalada*—a sale of tamales—the members took the opportunity to honor their parents and make a few thousand dollars to establish a scholarship fund. Today, the group still has its annual *tamalada*, which brings in over \$25,000 each year. All proceeds from this annual event are now going to EMPF.

EmCLP decided, however, it didn't only want to give a few lucky children scholarships. Instead it wanted to foster a college-going culture in its beloved El Monte and make college a real possibility for all children. Leaders, such as Andre Quintero, Norma Garcia, and her sister Maribel Garcia (who is now superintendent of one of the school districts in El Monte) emerged as a result of emCLP. They decided to come back to El Monte and give back to their hometown. As a result, they were able to propel an agenda, through CBI and EMPF, which not only aims to close the disparity gap but also demands a cultural shift—a belief that college is the expectation and the norm for all. This is now the common agenda for the residents involved in the CBI and in the EMPF.

## The Three School Districts in El Monte

A key finding from the report by Dr. Mendoza was the change in attitude parents expressed as their children got older. While parents eagerly stated that they wanted their kindergarteners to attend college, this optimism ebbed as children moved through elementary, middle, and then high school. Parents were hit with the reality of finance and the difficulty of navigating a school system they often did not understand. One major challenge, according to the report, was El Monte not having a unified school district. Not only is El Monte served by three separate school districts (El Monte Union High School District, Mountain View School District, and El Monte City School District), but the school districts did not have a history of cooperation. According to Dr. Mendoza, “No K-12 school district in the region has a strategic plan for how to create a district-wide college-going culture, how to increase parent engagement or how to strengthen connections between community stakeholders and schools. There is, however, widespread agreement that schools cannot improve education outcomes by themselves.” Without a system in place, students did not have a seamless pathway to college.

This challenge was especially salient for children from the many immigrant families in El Monte. A child enrolling into kindergarten as an English Language Learner could progress into 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade with little progress in language development—and without the school system tracking their lack of improvement as they moved to higher grades. Short of appropriate language support, the student could fall behind in all other subject areas, eventually needing remedial classes. Since high school does not typically offer language support, it would be difficult for the student to acquire the basic academic skills to graduate or take classes that are required for college. It was not uncommon for students with little likelihood of success to choose to drop out of school.

Through participation in the CBI Advisory Committee, the three school superintendents in El Monte began to work together for the first time to address this chronic problem. When Jeff Seymour retired recently, Maribel Garcia assumed this position for the Mountain View School District. She described this culture of collaboration as a significant shift that is now the norm for the school districts: “All of our school administrators come together and we do professional development together with the idea that we want to have this vertical articulation. The goal has always been the seamless path. The CBI has reinforced that. We’ve come together on additional issues and topics that have been good for us.”

Working together entails having a shared understanding of the challenges, a shared language for discussing these challenges, and a shared method for tackling them. As soon as school leaders accepted the fragmented school system as the primary culprit, it became clear that districts needed to improve their outcomes together. Their goals would not be achieved in isolation. If they wanted more children to attend college, they needed to:

- Improve reclassification of English Language Learners
- Increase understanding of college preparedness for both students and parents
- Increase parent and community engagement

## English Language Learners

Remaining a Long Term English Language Learner (LTELL) is a systemic matter that's due to both lack of academic support for language development in the early years as well as social and linguistic isolation of the child's family. Reclassification of English Learners has been a persistent concern in El Monte. Neither the teachers, schools, nor districts had a shared understanding of re-designation; nor did they have a shared solution for handling this growing problem. Prior to the districts working together, there was not a consistent definition of who LTELL are – which contributed to the challenge of identifying and tracking these students. One of the major achievements of the collaboration was the districts' agreement that LTELL are English Learners who have been learning English for six years or more and have stalled. In the beginning, 86% of English Language Learners in El Monte were LTELLs.

To address this issue, CCF commissioned Californians Together to work with the school districts on a study, which resulted in a report called *Reparable Harm*.<sup>3</sup> According to Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, executive director of Californians Together, "Our first year, our big challenge was that only one of the districts had the database system that would allow them to find out who these kids are. The three supervisors never talked about this issue of Long Term English Language Learners. Nobody was checking re-designations." Additionally, the superintendents recognized that English Language Development (ELD) instruction was non-existent in their individual schools. Students with the most need were falling by the wayside. With this report, the districts decided that they needed to efficiently track ELD students; increase teachers' aptitude regarding teaching and reclassifying ELD students; and integrate academic language into students' education.

"I feel that it's too late by the time you get to high school. If you're not college bound before you start middle school, you're never going to be in the right classes and you'll have a different track."

*Maribel Garcia, Superintendent  
El Monte City School District*

Districts coming together to problem-solve resulted in a jump in reclassification. Many high school students were reclassified out of ELD instruction and instead began working on required classes toward graduation and college admission. Spiegel-Coleman explained the significance of these students being able to take the appropriate classes this way: "If you were an ELL, you weren't able to go to college. Maybe to community college, but you wouldn't fare well. When we interviewed the students, we asked them if they wanted to go to college. They said yes, but didn't have all the course credits, no A-G [subject requirements]. Kids want to go and think they're going to college. They have no idea that they don't have the requirements to get in."

As the districts continued to work on this issue, their accomplishments were immediate and undeniable. As Superintendent Garcia remarked, "We reclassified so many kids last year the State thought it was an error!" Their work with LTELL resulted in a definition not only shared by them, but it has also become the state's definition by law. This year, every school district will have a common database and the information to recognize LTELL and those at risk of becoming LTELL. This way, they can track and reclassify students from

<sup>3</sup> Laurie Olson. *Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of Educational Opportunity for California's Long Term English Learners*. Californians Together, 2010.

middle school in one district to a high school in another, ensuring that every child has access to the right classes to prepare for college. Their work in reclassifying LTEL is a clear example of shared measurement and continuous communication in the Collective Impact framework.

### College Preparedness for Both Students and Parents

Without proper mastery of the English language, students aren't equipped to thrive in classes necessary for high school graduation or college entrance (i.e. courses that fulfill A-G requirements). Most notably, many El Monte students come from immigrant families that have historically lacked educational opportunities and struggled with sending their children to college. Their parents face not only the difficulties in understanding and navigating a complex and unfamiliar school system in a different language, but also a different cultural viewpoint through a lens of fear, insecurity and historical exclusion: What do you do when your child begins to grow out and away from what you've taught them and what you understand?

The school districts decided to address this barrier by making sure that both parents and students, together, were prepared for the rigors of college. At the high school level, students annually receive a customized printout of their A-G progress, which help explain to parents and students where their students are with the required classes to apply to colleges. These college transcript nights are now open to all parents. The El Monte Union High School District is also a partner in the El Monte Pledge Compact where it partners with California State University, Los Angeles, University of California Irvine, and Rio Hondo College. The colleges provide the high schools with support as well as information. The Pledge provides qualifying students from El Monte with priority for admission and enrollment at Pasadena City and Rio Hondo Colleges, as well as guaranteed and automatic admission to CSULA and UCI. These college nights are an important vehicle to motivate students to take the El Monte Pledge.

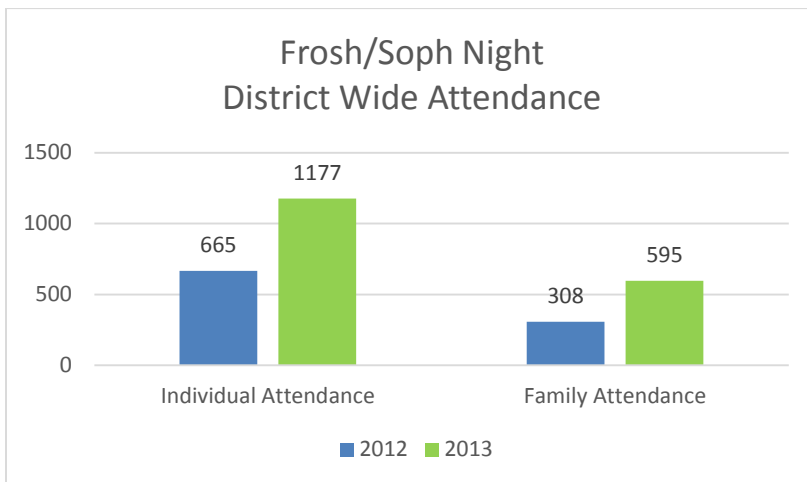
This effort to help all parents and students understand requirements has spanned across differences in language, culture, and education. Parent meetings are conducted in multiple languages. Dr. Mike Muñoz, Associate Dean of Student Services at Rio Hondo College who is one of the architects of these events, stated, "We found that Latino parents don't ask questions in a large group format. It's almost like it becomes a mass. So we do Small Table *Platicas* (roundtables) with different topics. The presenter jumps from table to table. We have a financial aid person talk for 10 minutes with parents and then jump to another table so that parents can ask more questions and be more engaged in small group discussions."

Because schools have noticed that parents are more open to being taught by other parents, the organizers have asked parents with college-attending children to share their own struggles and successes. Superintendent Salerno explained, "We utilize a lot of our graduates who are either in college or who have graduated from college to talk about their experiences. We had a panel last year with students, college graduates and parents of college graduates or attending college, and usually parents relate better with other parents. They talked about their fears, what they did, how things worked out. We're trying to knock down as many barriers as we can." Hearing about the experiences of other parents in El Monte seems to help ease their concerns and increase understanding.

While it is difficult to measure increase in parental knowledge, it is evident by the increase in attendance at these college nights that both parents and students are interested in learning more about how to get into



college. District-wide attendance in these college nights has increased by 184% for individuals and 103% for families from 2012 to 2013. Most remarkably, Arroyo High School has a 241% jump in attendance for its Frosh/Soph night in the same time period. Dr. Muñoz remarked, “We started planning these college nights five to six years ago. We thought we were going to have a peak in attendance the first years since it was new and then have a dip, but each year we’ve been increasing even though now it’s in its fifth year. We’re even seeing significant gains in these college nights at middle schools.” Consistent with the CBI leaders’ philosophy of promoting a college-going culture for all, Dr. Muñoz credited the increase in attendance to the fact that it “was not talking to a select few of those that we think are college-bound – it’s a whole school approach.”



Source: Muñoz, Mike. (2013) Funders’ Briefing Presentation [PDF document]. Retrieved from Rio Hondo College.

Because of this great collaborative experience, the three district superintendents continue to meet, along with other stakeholders like Rio Hondo College, to address other barriers, such as mathematics course offerings and placement, professional development for teachers and school staff, and children’s health insurance.

### Parent and Community Engagement

The findings of Dr. Mendoza’s report made such an impact on the CBI leaders that they realized they couldn’t tackle the issue of facilitating college for every child without changing the way parents looked at themselves, their children, and college. Superintendent Salerno explained, “A child may qualify to go to a certain school but the parents don’t have the money and so we need to give them the tools to see how they can through scholarships, grants, etc. We know if we don’t educate the parents, no matter what we do with the kids, there may still be some blockages...”

The districts wanted parents to have a better understanding of what is needed to help their children get into college. Leaders

“Now the parents are not just saying, ‘You need to go to college.’ Now they can say, ‘You need to take these classes, because these are the classes that you need to go to college.’ That is the education that is happening with parents.”

*Nick Salerno, Superintendent  
El Monte High School District*

also understood that the blockage does not stop at finances or college awareness of individual parents, but it could be low cultural expectations that pervade the entire community. Norma Garcia talked about the “head trash...that happens in the minds of poor communities.” She explained, “El Monte has one of the highest rents—the lowest rental vacancy. They need a living wage, just to pay that rent. Most parents are working two jobs, living in multiple family households. They are on survival skills. When you are on survival mode and have trouble paying rent, paying utilities, putting food on the table, how do you become an advocate if you are only thinking about today? Many studies say that children by third grade need to know that they are going to go to college. How do parents become those change agents at home, those advocates, when they are facing reality?”

Parents too wanted to learn and find ways to be more involved in their child’s education and get them to college. District leaders also believed that the hardworking parents of El Monte deserved to be supported in a way that educates and empowers them to be advocates for their children. While the districts shared the common goal of parent inclusion, it had different approaches on what that looked like. One superintendent explained that involvement can mean parents ensuring that children are fed, dressed and ready for school.

Another superintendent modeled the parent engagement at her schools after the work of Dr. Joyce Epstein’s Six Types of Involvement:

- 1) *Parenting* - Assisting families with parenting and child-rearing skills, and creating a home environment conducive to learning
- 2) *Communicating* - Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home communications
- 3) *Volunteering* - Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support student and school programs
- 4) *Learning at home* - Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum activities and decisions
- 5) *Decision making* - Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations
- 6) *Collaborating with the community* - Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with outside groups, and provide services to the community

“How do parents become those change agents at home, those advocates, when they are facing reality?”

*Norma Garcia, El Monte Promise Foundation*

This framework, used by the Mountain View School District, understands involvement as a complex process that could include fostering a deeper understanding of curriculum, providing parents education materials that help them teach their children educational concepts in the home, or having Parent and Advisory Councils where they are taught specific skills and strategies to support their children in and outside of the classroom.

Lillian Maldonado-French, superintendent at this district, explained, “We phased out large district-level meetings and focused on the school level. Now our meetings are sometimes Friday evening. They started doing this ‘Fun Family Fridays’ once a month. Teachers used to plan it, but now the parents are involved in its creation.”

In many cases, parents shared deep family stories with each other that had huge impact on transforming a college-going culture in ways that no one else could. These parent-led spaces have allowed the community to expose collective biases and fears and heal from them.

### **The Power of Elevating the Voice of Parents**

*Two of the three superintendents interviewed expressed surprise and gratitude at having parents themselves dispel common parental fears and discuss other barriers that make it difficult for students to go to college. The message was particularly powerful because it came from other parents.*

*For example, in the Latin culture, parents often fear that if their daughters leave the home, they may end up pregnant. Because parents want the well-being of their daughters, they often discourage them from going to college.*

Nick Salerno, former superintendent at the El Monte Union High School District, explained further, “We teach every student about A-G, college admissions, financial aid, grades, and the personal statement they have to submit. We meet regularly with Rio Hondo where CSULA and UCI people also present to them. We try to do a thorough job of educating the kids on what they need to do. We are also getting the parents so they feel comfortable with these things. That way they would partner with us. Sometimes this is a cultural issue. Especially for the young women, parents are worried about their daughters getting pregnant, but data shows that a college education can delay pregnancy. We try to get them all the information they need to make an informed decision.”

On a separate interview, Superintendent Maribel Garcia also recalled a panel where parents talked to other parents about how difficult it had been for them when their children went to college. Superintendent Garcia exclaimed over the powerful interaction between the presenter—a member of the community—and the other parents, when the presenter cried over her attitude towards her own daughter going to college: “A parent gave this testimony on how she was calling her daughter a prostitute because her daughter wanted to go to college. This woman was sobbing.” She had overcome this fear of her daughter becoming pregnant and realized the importance of a college education. “There were over 300 parents that showed up for this. For our parents to see that first hand...I don’t care what college expert you have up there, nothing can duplicate what that parent did for them.”

Complementing school-based parent engagement, CBI also worked with Dr. Juan Benitez and Dr. Rigo Rodriguez at the Center for Community Engagement at the California State University, Long Beach, to develop leadership and increase civic engagement in the broader city. It established a Community Scholars Program (CSP) to train young people and emerging leaders on issues important to their community as well as advocacy and organizing skills. Some graduates from this program went on to form Community Leaders for a Better El Monte (*Lideres Comunitarios para un Mejor El Monte*). The group held forums that attracted 80 to 100 people usually on timely topics such as the City's proposals on raising taxes on sugary drinks, as well as educational issues, such as the A-G requirements. Local superintendents came to this forum to hear community voices. The group was also a community voice in the Local Control and Accountability Plan process. One of its leaders, Martin Correa, explained, "At our last meeting, we spoke to Superintendent Nick Salerno and asked him questions about the money that was coming in, how it was going to be used, and how it was going to benefit the community." Martin and other new leaders like him have benefitted from this training and catapulted into leadership positions in the community, such as serving on the CBI Advisory Committee or the EMPF board of directors, as the latter organization made a strategic decision to include more community residents in its governance.

However, as parents increased their knowledge and built their capacity, CBI leaders also recognized certain challenges. One was that "existing leaders are stretched." Another challenge was the lack of Asian parent involvement in these efforts. The involvement of Asian community members is a challenge for many community organizations, such as First 5 L.A. Best Start, doing work in El Monte that are trying to better represent the interest of El Monte's main populations. In spite of that, the CBI has struggled and continues to struggle to engage more Asian parents.

### **Academic Successes**

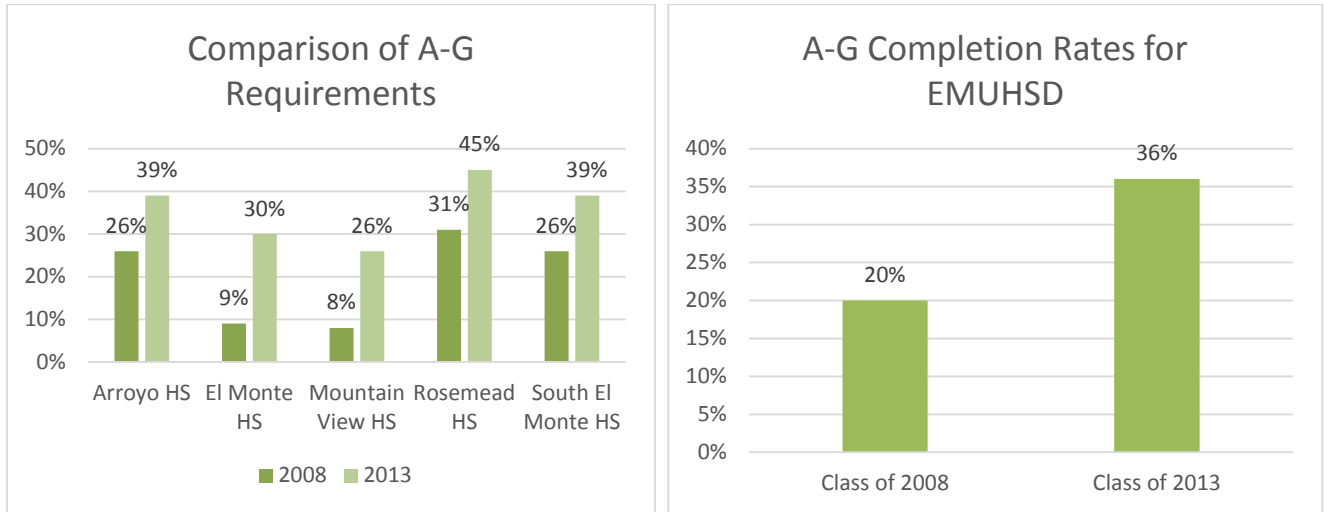
The El Monte Pledge, the college nights, the reclassification of Long-Term English Language learners, parent engagement, community activism through groups like Community Leaders for a Better El Monte, and the impending plan by EMPF to increase financial literacy for families and help parents set up college savings accounts for their children, are *mutually reinforcing activities* that are transforming El Monte into a city with a college-going culture. While this transformation is hard to quantify, the community is witnessing a dramatic improvement in the following academic indicators:

- 1) Increase in completion of university entrance requirements;
- 2) Increase in college access;
- 3) Improvement in student success; and
- 4) Increase in college persistence and retention rates.

### ***Completion of University Entrance Requirements:***

Students have increased their university entrance requirements from 20% for the class of 2008 to 36% for the class of 2013. For some high schools in El Monte, such as El Monte High School and Mountain View High School, the increase is even more dramatic.

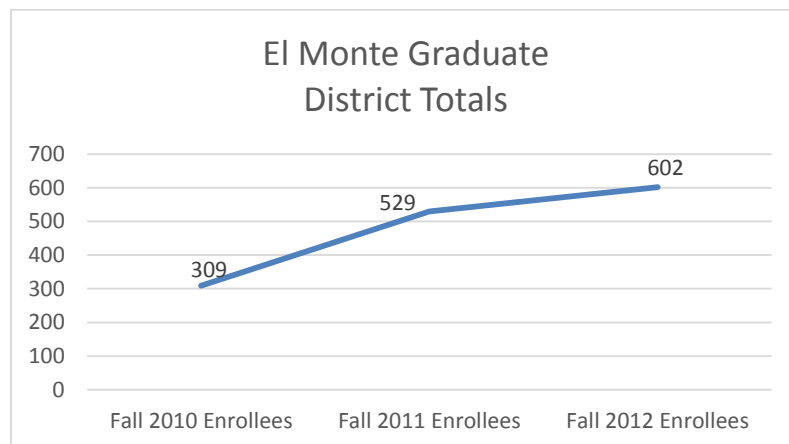
The following slides are the result of collaborative work between Rio Hondo College and the El Monte High School District:



Source: Muñoz, Mike. (2013) Funders' Briefing Presentation [PDF document]. Retrieved from Rio Hondo College.

**College Access:**

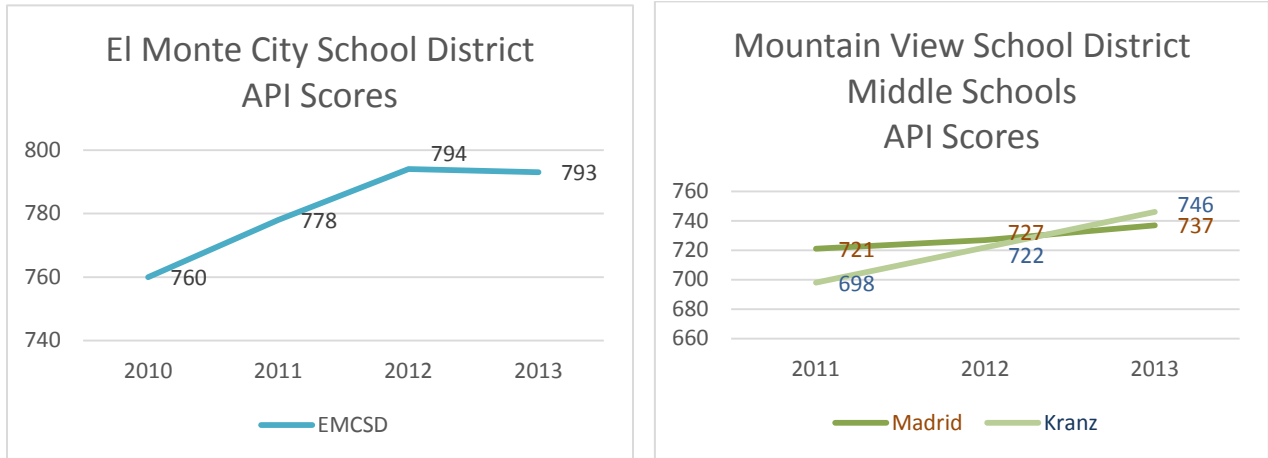
Rio Hondo College also marked increased enrollment from high school graduates in El Monte from 309 students in Fall 2010 to almost double that number two years later. This was due in part to Rio Hondo College giving El Monte graduates priority registration to partnering colleges and universities.



Source: Muñoz, Mike. (2013) Funders' Briefing Presentation [PDF document]. Retrieved from Rio Hondo College.

**Student Success:**

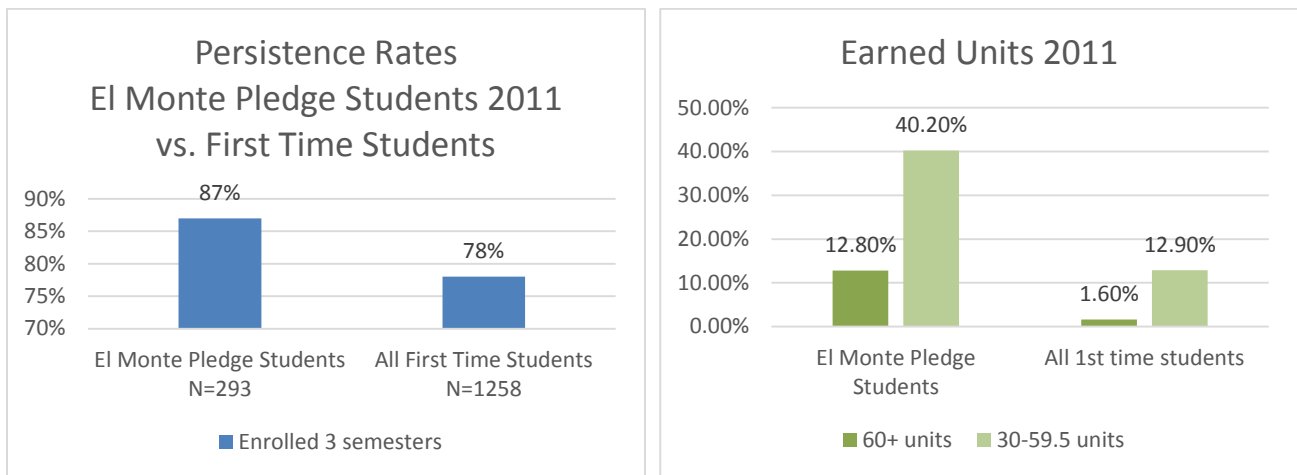
There was also a dramatic increase in academic performance. El Monte City School District's students showed an increase in the Academic Performance Index from 760 in 2010 to 793 in 2013, according to state standards. The Academic Performance Index is a unit of measurement used by the state of California to measure K-12 academic performance based on California State Assessment Scores.



Source: Muñoz, Mike. (2013) Funders' Briefing Presentation [PDF document]. Retrieved from Rio Hondo College.

### College Persistence and Retention Rates:

The persistence rate is the percent of students who enroll Fall and Spring semester of the same academic year and enroll in Fall semester of the following academic year. El Monte Pledge students showed a persistence rate of 87% compared to all first-time students (78%).



Source: Muñoz, Mike. (2013) Funders' Briefing Presentation [PDF document]. Retrieved from Rio Hondo College.

## Health of El Monte Students

The health of children was seen as an integral part to supporting their academic success. The more a student is physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy, the fewer days of school they will miss, the better brain

functioning and comprehension are, and the more they are able to contribute in the classroom. There are many factors that impact a student’s health in El Monte – poverty, lack of green space, air quality, immigration status, lack of access to health insurance, and rising obesity rates. The City of El Monte was already trying to tackle these issues with a number of strategies, including revising the city’s General Plan to incorporate an emphasis on health and wellbeing for all El Monte residents and proposing a sugary drink tax. The health component of the General Plan included increasing green space and increasing the physical activity of children and adults. To align with the General Plan, CBI had developed two strategies to improve the health of students in El Monte – increasing access to health care via health insurance enrollment and increasing physical activity for children and youth.

### Health in the School Districts

Health was important to all the stakeholders in the CBI, but how could the initiative impact health in a way that was effective and have a broad reach? Health insurance enrollment was a good first step towards improving the health of a child. Being able to access physical, mental and dental health services is important, especially when poor health conditions can be exacerbated by poverty and other environmental and social factors. In El Monte, approximately 6% of children ages 0-17 have health insurance.<sup>4</sup>

A common access point to children and families in El Monte was the school districts. Through the CBI, the California Community Foundation brought together the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), a leader in child health policy and practice in California, American Association of School Administrators (AASA), El Monte Union High School District (EMUHSD) and Mountain View School District (MVSD), as well as local health clinics. As mentioned earlier, the three school districts collaborating with each other was new for El Monte. The school districts had different visions of how they could improve the health of their students, but under the Collective Impact framework, they needed a common approach to address health. The main goal was to “develop a systematic means of enrolling uninsured children in El Monte with free and affordable health coverage” accomplished by a shared way to track progress and meet certain benchmarks, continuous communication and coordination with all partners, and data sharing agreements between schools and health service providers.

“In our district, 92-94% of children are on free or reduced lunch. It’s not just low socioeconomic status, but real hunger in some cases.”

*Lillian Maldonado French,  
Superintendent, Mountain View  
School District*

It took a lot of meetings for the school districts and their partners to eventually agree to have a system-wide school-based health insurance enrollment program. Over the past two years, the school districts, CDF, AASA and local health service providers have worked on a system that is working for them. It is a model used in different states to successfully and effectively identify, outreach and enroll children in health insurance. Now, when a child begins the new school year, their parents complete school enrollment forms that include a question on whether the child has health insurance. Those forms are collected by school administrators and

---

<sup>4</sup> Source: 2011 Los Angeles County Health Survey; Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, Los Angeles County Department of Public Health.

entered into a database specific to each school. Those children without health insurance are flagged and then referred to the health service providers. The data sharing agreements allow the schools to provide the contact information for the child and parents to the health service provider that the district has partnered with where Certified Application Assistants (CAA) or other outreach coordinators contact the family, helping them enroll for the health insurance program they are qualified for. If successful, the child will be enrolled in a new health insurance program, allowing them to see a doctor, dentist and/or other health care specialists regularly. This collaboration has shown immediate success. As Superintendent Maldonado-French remarked, “Children’s health insurance coverage has gone way up. I think it’s doubled.”

However, this process can be long. CAAs can spend up to an hour or more applying for a family, and different health insurance programs have different requirements and methods for enrolling participants. The health insurance application can be sent back several times requiring more information and paperwork before it is finally approved. It is not unusual for families to move or change phone numbers, making it difficult for schools and health care providers to follow up with families. If CAAs are unable to contact a family after three attempts, providers return the families’ information requesting school administrators to retrieve updated contact information. This can be a daunting task for a school administrator with hundreds of children coming through their school daily and having to complete their normal workload. Children may also fall through the cracks as applications get lost or are never received.

In addition to health insurance enrollment, El Monte school districts do other activities to maintain the health of their students. Mountain View and El Monte City, in collaboration with AASA, provide breakfast programs for their children. As soon as a child walks through the school gates, they are guided to the cafeteria to grab a nutritious breakfast and sent to class where they eat their meals comfortably with their classmates. “In our district, 92-94% of children are on free or reduced lunch. It’s not just low socioeconomic status, but real hunger in some cases,” explained Superintendent Maldonado-French. MVUSD also has Harvest of the Month where 4<sup>th</sup> grade students receive a particular fruit or vegetable, teachers receive lesson plans, and they learn to make different meals; thereby increasing the interest and consumption of fruits and vegetables. Community liaisons with the school districts outreach to parents to provide them information about different types of health insurance and how to enroll. El Monte City, in collaboration with Our Saviour Center, has established a one-stop clinic where students and families in El Monte can go and receive an array of health services, such as medical, dental, mental, nutrition education, as well as financial education and food assistance. This type of comprehensive center is a much-needed resource in El Monte as many families are low-income, unemployed, and have fair to poor health. Mountain View is also looking to replicate a similar center in their school district.

### **Soccer for Success in El Monte**

Soccer for Success is a free afterschool soccer program funded by the U.S. Soccer Foundation to help “combat obesity and promote healthy lifestyles for children in under-resourced urban communities.” Soccer for Success operates in hundreds of cities across the United States. Having a national soccer program such as this in El Monte adds to the soccer culture surrounding Los Angeles, especially with the sport growing in the U.S., with the help of professional teams like the L.A. Galaxy and Chivas USA, and the success of the men’s and women’s



U.S. National soccer teams. It also provides an affordable resource where other existing soccer leagues are fee-based, making it difficult for low-income families to participate.

Soccer for Success has four major program components – 90 minutes of non-competitive soccer play at least three days a week, nutrition education, mentorship to promote teamwork and leadership, and family engagement to help parents and families apply the program’s teachings. Participants in the program also get a free t-shirt, socks, shin guards, soccer ball and pay no registration or league fees. Soccer for Success is currently implemented in four El Monte schools – Columbia Elementary and Durfee Elementary from El Monte City School District, Kranz Intermediate and Madrid Middle School from Mountain View School District – with nearly 1,000 students ranging from 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, with more schools to be hopefully added in the future.

Establishing Soccer for Success in El Monte didn’t just happen overnight. A few years ago, local community leader Martin Correa and several other residents, had a vision of using soccer to help kids in El Monte become more active and to give them something to do. Through the help of mini-grants from the Community Building Initiative, Martin was able to start “El Monte in Motion,” creating a soccer program where children can play for free.

The program was short-lived. However, his idea planted a seed with the California Community Foundation as a basis to pursue a two-year grant from the U.S. Soccer Foundation to establish a free soccer program. Since CCF decided to make the program more sustainable, it looked for partners in El Monte that could successfully apply for and receive the Soccer for Success grant. There were three established afterschool service providers at individual El Monte schools that provided tutoring and safe places. However, two of them were not conducting sports leagues and not experienced with conducting federally funded programs. Our Saviour Center (OSC) was ready for the task and willing to play a lead role. Yet, bringing the other two organizations together to collaborate with OSC was no small feat. After meeting for several months and working through some heated discussions, the three organizations came to a compromise. The three organizations coordinate their services so that one does not interfere with the other or compete for participants. Their staff and outreach also cut across programs to allow for optimal coordination. With Soccer for Success being an afterschool program, the three El Monte school districts were also brought on board. Having buy-in from all partners was key to implementing Soccer for Success successfully in the entire city.

In Spring of 2012, Soccer For Success was established in El Monte. The program started with 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in Kranz Intermediate and Madrid Middle School. The goal was to recruit 1,000 students into the program, a requisite for the U.S. Soccer Foundation funding, but this proved to be difficult. Children would sign-up at the beginning, but then drop off at the end, while others participated inconsistently; a common



problem among afterschool programs. Yet, the only way to get 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders to participate in the program was to start recruiting them earlier. OSC decided to expand recruitment to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, but with a targeted approach. Specifically, it looked at those elementary schools that fed into Kranz and Madrid. As a result, Columbia Elementary and Durfee Elementary schools joined the program. With this program expansion, it has now close to 1,000 students and growing.

Rex Botengan, executive director at Our Saviour Center, said that after two years they are meeting their goals and the program is really helping students become more active. Children's body-mass index scores are decreasing. PACER tests, which are aerobic cardiovascular endurance tests where students run in place for a specified time, are improving. Knowledge of nutrition education is also increasing among participants. He added, "At least 90 minutes of activity a session does help. It is very encouraging."

Our Saviour Center hopes to expand the program not just to other schools, but to also add other components or different sports. This may be possible as OSC recently received a two-year funding extension from the U.S. Soccer Foundation. The challenge is that Soccer for Success is very prescriptive, and grantees must adhere to the program components. One component is that the play has to be non-competitive. OSC has also been in discussions with LA84, which provides funding to sports programs, but only if the program includes competitive play. Students and parents for years have been asking the program to allow them to play against other students outside of their school. Playing against the same kids over and over becomes stagnant after a while. OSC has decided to allow schools to play against each other on the weekends, hoping this will provide children with a different set of skills, to become more competitive if they decide to pursue advanced levels of soccer, and could potentially set them up for LA84, Cal South Soccer Foundation and other funding.

### **Opportunities for the Health Component**

All the partners in the CBI, including the emerging backbone organization EMPF, understand the importance of health, especially as a tool to support and improve the academic success of students. With its concentration on educational efforts, EMPF felt it needs more infrastructure to expand its focus, or else it risks "spreading itself too thin." Children's Defense Fund hopes that there is increased coordination between the schools, school districts and local clinics, increased access for CAAs to school sites to make the enrollment process easier for families, and increased capacity of school districts to take on enrolling children in health insurance on their own. This could help the system become more efficient at providing health insurance and health services to El Monte students. Mountain View Unified School District has identified school nurses, community liaisons, administrators and office staff to take tours through different clinics. This has helped both parties to build relationships and understand more about each other's system so that it could coordinate better. True to the Collective Impact framework, Lorena Sanchez, program coordinator at the Children's Defense Fund, explained, "Getting them to the table to talk, communicate, and understand how they can best work together to meet their goals – I think that will be the bigger success."

With a two-year extension on its U.S. Soccer Foundation grant, OSC has the opportunity to expand the reach and impact of its Soccer for Success program. Soccer for Success can also be used as a primer for other organizations and communities to use sports as a tool to improve the health of El Monte students and families. Lastly, some partners mentioned the lack of a strong health care leader in El Monte that can step up,

provide expertise, and pull agents together to make health a stronger component in the CBI. It has been difficult for some clinics to participate as it is trying to respond to the new regulations and procedures under the Affordable Care Act, which encourages competition for grant money instead of collaborating to make a joint impact on health in El Monte.

## The El Monte Promise Foundation

When CCF began the CBI and created a space for groups to join together to build this pipeline, it focused its work through a Collective Impact framework. Its work is delineated below, in an attempt to demonstrate how it shaped its efforts to build a pipeline.

COMPONENTS	ACCOMPLISHMENTS/STRENGTHS
<b>Common Agenda</b>	The education piece has a very strong focus. Many of the members were both students and teachers in the school systems of El Monte, and have a deep understanding of student needs. All CBI leaders are committed to building a pipeline to college for all, and not just for a few.
<b>Shared Measurement Systems</b>	Districts have worked together to define Long Term English Language Learners. They are working together to have databases throughout their schools that help them track these students from school to school. This allowed for better reclassification, which enhanced students' ability to take the right classes for high school education and college entrance. Data was also shared between the High School District and Rio Hondo College for the El Monte Pledge.
<b>Mutually Reinforcing Activities</b>	The El Monte Pledge, the college nights, the reclassification of Long Term English Language Learners, parent engagement, and community activism through groups like Community Leaders for a Better El Monte, as well as an impending plan by EMPF to increase financial literacy for families and help parents set up college savings accounts for their children, are <i>mutually reinforcing activities</i> that are transforming El Monte into a city with a college-going culture.
<b>Continuous Communications</b>	The superintendents meet regularly to plan and act together. This is now the norm. Their staff is also meeting each other. In general, there is a lot of communication among school districts, local colleges (like Rio Hondo), and the El Monte Promise Foundation.
<b>Backbone Support Organizations</b>	EMPF is building its infrastructure to become the backbone organization. It is recognized as such by CCF, college partners, and local leaders.

As the emerging backbone organization, El Monte Promise Foundation plans to continue its strong focus on education and push its initiative to help all El Monte students go to college.

The City of El Monte has a stake in the well-being and success of the El Monte Promise Foundation and its current goals. The City contributes to the work of EMPF in helping parents set up college savings accounts for

their children, which Mayor Quintero considers an essential economic development strategy for the city. The mayor continues to participate in the CBI Advisory Committee and EMPF as a concerned parent in the city. Unfortunately, the City of El Monte is still working through budget gaps left by the recent economic crisis. With hopes that some of the city's finances will be restored as the economy rebounds, the City can play a vital role in supporting the "cradle to college" pipeline and implementing the health components of its current General Plan.

Despite challenges, partners are excited to continue the work set forth by the CBI. The El Monte Promise Foundation is thinking of ways to engage the City more by helping city officials understand how the initiative aligns with the city's economic and development strategies. EMPF is also looking to engage other initiatives, such as the First 5 L.A. Best Start Initiative, which focuses on providing a healthy environment for children 0 to 5 years old and their families. EMPF and its partners are hoping to provide a lasting legacy to change El Monte into a college-going city, to invest in the future workforce, and to attract more resources that will fund the maintenance and expansion of the initiative to change El Monte for the better.

## Lessons Learned

In 2011, after the outcomes evaluation by Dr. Julie Mendoza, CCF rethought its investment in El Monte. Impact evaluation resonated with its processes, and it wanted to be more thoughtful about monetary contribution to partners in El Monte. CCF understood that its impact needed to be felt at a cultural level. It didn't want one lucky student to go to college, it wanted to break down barriers to make it possible for all students to attend college. This meant convening districts and organizations, but also parents, students, and community members. Its multilevel approach was intent on tackling these issues on a systemic level. It was this approach that has made CCF's project so successful and has given a voice to the people in El Monte.

The lessons learned from this project focus on the role of the foundation beyond that of a grant-maker, and CCF's role in convening, linking, and acting as an impetus for community action.

### Readiness and timing

Unlike other collective impact initiatives, CCF did not create or impose a direction for the community. Even before the idea of collective impact, various groups and parents were already aiming in the direction of education access. CCF identified emerging opportunities by talking to organizations also doing work in this area, such as the El Monte Coalition of Latino Professionals, as well as the three school districts in El Monte. By listening and collecting information from organizations that had not established a communication mechanism, CCF found common ground that later informed their strategic approach. It funneled the energies of groups already working on these same issues and facilitated collective action. Its initiative is successful because the organizations and school districts in El Monte were already primed for action. However, without the work of CCF as a convener, it is questionable whether they would have found a way to work together. The three districts did not share a positive relationship. While CCF's role in bringing them together was crucial, it's also important to note that this was largely possible because two of the three districts were under new leadership that was more open to collaboration.

## Creating systems and infrastructure

When CCF created a space for organizations to come together and work together, this led to a change in systems and policy. Because El Monte does not have a unified school district, this has posed multiple problems, especially when the leadership did not share resources, data, and ideas. CCF's work in bringing the school districts together helped schools define the shared problem of education access (and its root causes) as well as develop a common system for tracking English Language Learners and preventing those same students from becoming Long Term English Language Learners. In turn, this increases the chance that students will both graduate and go to college through an established pipeline. It also has a system for ensuring that children are flagged and enrolled into healthcare as soon as they are assigned to a school, increasing access to health services. Information is shared among districts and from districts to colleges. In doing so, both districts and colleges are able to more fully understand whether and how students are successful.

## Grassroots action and organic movement building

It is not necessary to have a grassroots component to have a successful collective impact strategy. Despite this, CCF opted to integrate voices from the community through different resident leadership development efforts as well as support for parent engagement in the schools. Grassroots leadership development has been a key component to this project. Parents and residents have strongly influenced the initiative. They are not only teaching workshops and organizing community forums, but they are also starting to assume leadership in the community, such as being board members of the El Monte Promise Foundation. They are part of decision-making that will directly affect their own communities and the lives of their children. This not only creates buy-in, but also increases the sustainability of this multi-sector initiative, providing a stronger foundation for long-term change.

## Considerations

Collective impact, when done strategically, can powerfully change communities. Other collective impact models have also brought groups together to create change. Because every community is different, there are also strong variations in how an initiative may opt to apply collective impact. Some may choose to lean on it heavily, sharing common agendas and continuous communication, while others may use it much more loosely. This is not a take-it-or-leave-it process. All communities have their own group dynamics, cultural history, and internal capacity to consider. Sometimes, an outside player can be a catalyst to challenge all these factors that keep organizations from coming together. As this report suggests, it is not solely the collective impact approach that has made this Initiative a success. The role of CCF, beyond that of a traditional grantmaker, is also an important contributor.

It is thus important to consider what makes CCF's dynamics, capacity, role, and relationship with the community uniquely able to work so effectively in El Monte. What other communities can this be replicated? What is the "right" timing? How can CCF and other foundations assess community readiness (and their own) in implementing a collective impact approach? What makes a community open to change and collective action? What can a foundation do to make a community more receptive? How do you find common ground that is actionable? The experience of the El Monte Community Building Initiative contributes to a growing body of work that are seeking clearer answers to these questions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the following individuals who gave us their time and insights about the El Monte Community Building Initiative for this report:

- Rex Botengan, Our Saviour Center
- Martin Correa, Community Leaders for a Better El Monte
- Vera de Vera, California Community Foundation
- Superintendent Maribel Garcia, El Monte City School District
- Norma Garcia, El Monte Promise Foundation
- Superintendent Lillian Maldonado French, Mountain View School District
- Frank Molina, California Community Foundation
- Dr. Mike Muñoz, Rio Hondo College
- Mayor Andre Quintero, City of El Monte
- Dr. Rigo Rodriguez, California State University, Long Beach
- Superintendent Nick Salerno, El Monte Union High School District
- Lorena Sanchez, Children's Defense Fund
- Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, Californians Together