



Achievements & Lessons  
Learned from El Monte  
Community Building Initiative



California  
**COMMUNITY**  
Foundation

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# Achievements & Lessons Learned from El Monte Community Building Initiative

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## FOREWORD FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO

*“Change happens at the speed of trust.” –Dr. Stephen R. Covey*

In 2006, the California Community Foundation (CCF) embarked on one of the most ambitious and challenging initiatives in our history: the El Monte Community Building Initiative (CBI). The 10-year, \$8.5 million initiative represented a break from traditional grantmaking. Instead of investing in specific organizations and interventions, CBI deployed a long-term, place-based community improvement approach to create change in El Monte. **With support from the CCF Board of Directors, the foundation committed to testing how this new model could make a tangible impact on an underserved community of Los Angeles County.**

We soon discovered there was an obstacle to our success, and that obstacle was us. In our rush to address the needs of El Monte, we neglected to listen to what the community felt their needs were. We expected collaboration without developing the trust of the local community and civic leadership. Our well-meaning approach was focused on change made *to* a community instead of *by* it. Before we could help transform El Monte, we had to transform ourselves as a foundation.

Those first rocky years taught us lessons that now define much of what we do. Action begins with listening to the community. Effective solutions require not just financial resources, but community engagement. Supporting convening, facilitation, advocacy and communications makes a huge difference toward driving change. Above all, lasting change cannot be imported. It must be homegrown.

Thanks to course corrections and a renewed commitment to community partnership, CBI created a space for El Monte’s government, school districts, nonprofits and other sectors to work together to pursue a common agenda for the community, which eventually focused on improving education and health for El Monte’s youth. Our partners were empowered to mobilize and leverage their unique strengths and assets. Our grants supported community projects, while also investing in facilitation, coaching and capacity building.

Evaluations over the years show that youth, parents and civic leaders in the City of El Monte are now better prepared to collaborate and ensure local kids grow up healthy and ready for college and a career. Change did not occur overnight. It took a decade—listening to the community, building their trust, learning from them and adapting to their needs—to ensure CBI was creating positive change.

In this document, you will read about how CBI changed a community and taught us how to be a more effective community foundation. While we know that CBI’s full impact will not be felt for years to come, we hope these lessons can serve as a resource for other organizations exploring place-based initiatives as a mechanism for strengthening communities by building resident and nonprofit capacity.

Sincerely,

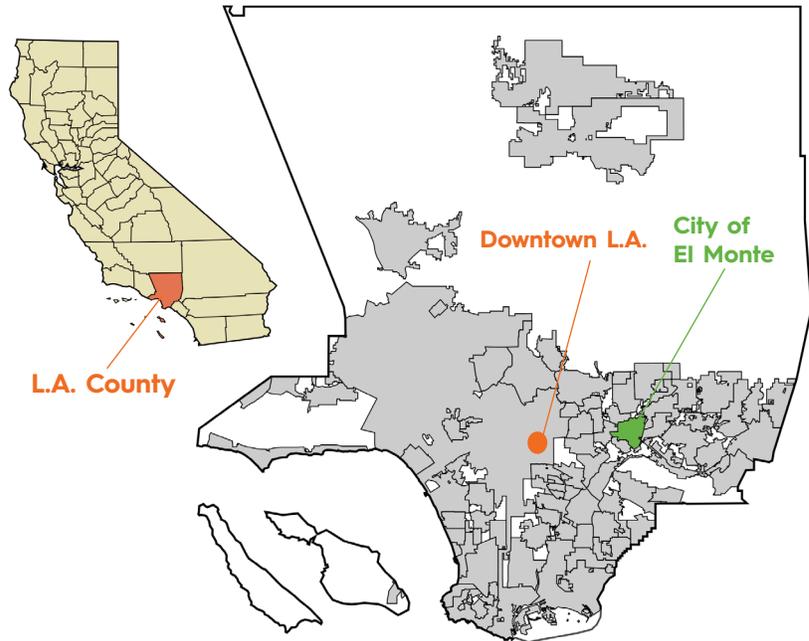


Antonia Hernández  
President & CEO  
California Community Foundation

## WHY EL MONTE?

Across the United States, we are seeing the “suburbanization of poverty,” where suburbs are becoming home to the largest and fastest-growing poor population in the country.

In 2006, CCF developed a program to reverse this trend in Los Angeles County by embarking on one of the most ambitious endeavors in its history. In planning for the community building initiative, the foundation aimed to amplify its impact by concentrating philanthropic resources in a single locale, engaging the entire community and investing over the long-term. The foundation hoped to create a model for sustainable change.



After an extensive assessment of several communities across Los Angeles County, CCF chose the City of El Monte for the initiative. Located 13 miles east of downtown Los Angeles, El Monte reflects the socio-economic and ethnic diversity of the county.

CCF's internal research and external consultants found that El Monte demonstrated similar needs to other underserved parts of Los Angeles County, such as South Los Angeles, but El Monte was unique in some ways:

- El Monte was one of the **lowest-income cities** in Los Angeles County, and half of its population was born outside the United States.<sup>i</sup>
- The community was **receiving less funding** from the philanthropic sector compared to other regions of need in Los Angeles County.<sup>ii</sup>
- There was **no organized base of residents** who were trained to advocate for improvements in the community.<sup>iii</sup>
- There were **few community-based organizations**, especially ones with the infrastructure to plan and implement an ambitious initiative like the one envisioned by CCF.

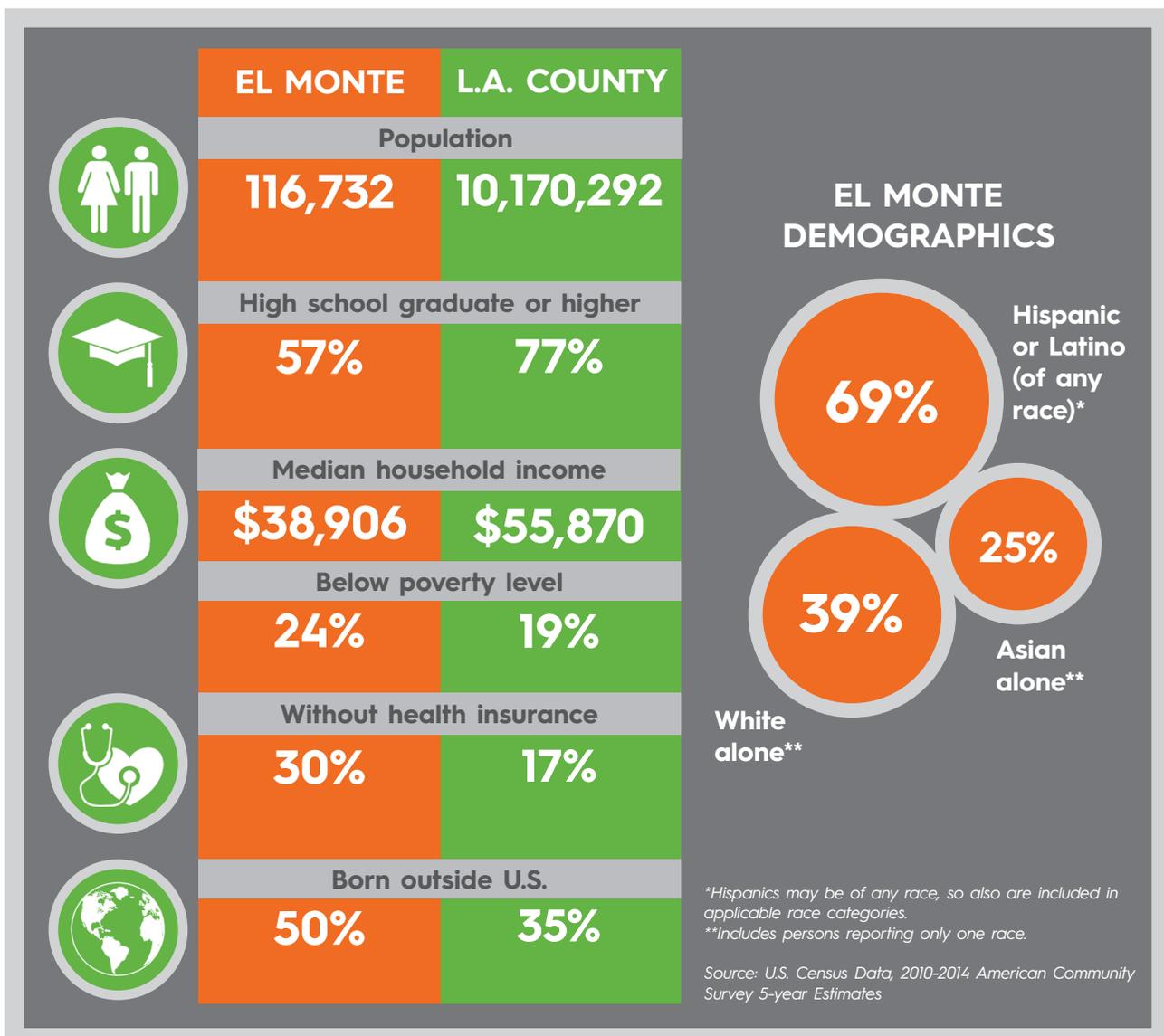
Given this landscape, El Monte became a worthy candidate for this 10-year investment. Despite programming pivots and adjustments throughout the course of the investment, community engagement and capacity building remained constant goals.

## LESSONS FOR FUNDERS

Over the course of a decade, the El Monte Community Building Initiative (CBI) worked with local leaders, institutions and community members to build capacity and improve health, education and career opportunities for families and children in the area through diverse programs from college savings to youth fitness. Throughout the implementation of CBI, the foundation was able to see what worked well and make necessary course corrections when tactics did not meet expectations. While these adjustments were difficult, it is the foundation's hope that the following insights and lessons can be applied to future community building initiatives:

### Engage the Community and Empower Local Leaders

El Monte was selected in part because of its lack of a pipeline for new civic leaders. For many years, long-term elected and appointed officials controlled much of the community's resources and programs. Developing the next generation of El Monte leadership became



a main strategy of CBI in order to ensure the legacy of the work would be maintained for decades to come. Engagement of young emerging leaders on a CBI Advisory Committee who were already affecting change in El Monte was critical, providing opportunities for them to apply their leadership styles and skills in a collaborative setting. It is vital to develop the capacity of locals who have leadership potential. In communities where young people are returning to create positive social change, initiatives can be strengthened by working with these emerging leaders to develop and implement strategies that are organic, authentic movements.

Additionally, as the city is served by three school districts that had historically not worked in tandem with one another, CCF knew it would be important to bring together leadership from each of these districts in order to foster collaboration, common goals and data sharing.

Just as important was a focus on building the convening and facilitation skills of residents who traditionally were not included in civic engagement forums. Residents included immigrant parents and grandparents of school-aged children, many of whom were limited-English speakers and unfamiliar with traditional nonprofit organizations or how to advocate for their needs in institutional settings. Through a resident leadership training program, they learned how to mobilize and organize community forums to raise awareness and engage in public sector decisions on issues that directly impact their lives, such as school and City budget and financing processes, leadership transitions in schools and affordable housing challenges.

### **Recognize Funder Power Dynamics**

It took some time for CCF to let go of the typical funder tendency toward outcome-based planning and directives, and instead embrace the wisdom and courage of the community of El Monte. CCF selected El Monte without much outreach to the community before confirming it as the location for CBI. This added several years of challenges that could have potentially been avoided. While there is no such thing as a ready-made “partner,” engaging the community before starting a place-based initiative is necessary. It will better prepare the community for such an intervention and allow the funder to better gauge community interest and capacity for change. CBI also helped shape the foundation’s definition of civic engagement by solidifying the idea that the power of the community is the only sustainable change agent. Once the foundation employed this mindset to lead CBI, the initiative was much more successful at achieving its objectives.

### **Be Humble and Willing to Adapt**

Developed in 2006, the initial CBI approach was a comprehensive community improvement model. During the initiative’s first two years, CCF commissioned research and sponsored a series of meetings to help the community articulate its priorities. This resulted in a strategic plan of more than 100 pages that outlined 36 priority areas including affordable housing, transportation, education, health and arts and culture.

In 2009, after \$2 million invested, CCF commissioned an independent evaluation of CBI to determine its efficacy to date. The evaluation took an honest, unvarnished look and found that “El Monte CBI is a

**"El Monte CBI is a source of growing concern to all its stakeholders, who express disappointment, frustration and, in some cases, a fear of outright failure."**

-Independent Evaluation, 2009

source of growing concern to all its stakeholders, who express disappointment, frustration and, in some cases, a fear of outright failure.<sup>iv</sup> The report found that CBI was stalled due to conflicting priorities, CCF staff turnover, a limited pool of nonprofits with place-based experience and unclear expectations between CCF and the City of El Monte.

The evaluation became a much-needed wakeup call for the foundation to re-configure and better focus the initiative in order to see maximum impact. From 2009 to 2010, CCF took several actions to place the initiative back on course toward its original goal of revitalizing a community:

- In partnership with the community, **refocusing the framework for CBI's goals** from a broad, comprehensive community improvement approach to a more intentional focus on health and education outcomes for El Monte youth.
- **Reconfiguring CBI staff** at CCF to include people with government and community relations experience and a constant field presence in the community. Frank Molina, an El Monte native—and Vera de Vera, a nonprofit expert—were brought on to better work with the community and move the project forward. They committed to staying on until the end of the initiative to avoid further transition.
- **Establishing extensive and regular community engagement** and communications.
- **Broadening partnerships** to more fully engage community stakeholders such as the three local school districts, local colleges and parent and youth representatives.

"Some stakeholders described the earlier CBI approach as 'too broad' or that it 'focused on way too much.' They believe strategies to improve educational outcomes for youth offer a more manageable approach to meeting the community's needs."

-Independent Evaluation, 2011

The recession that began in 2008 also deepened the need for resources and a collective impact model. As the City and school districts began to cut back on social programs, a strategic approach to using limited resources became ever more critical.

“ I’ve seen what other schools and communities have, and I know that we can have that. I do it not just for my grandson, but for all the kids in El Monte. If the community is involved, something good is going to happen. ”

**-Juan Martin Correa**  
El Monte CBI Advisory Committee

These adjustments proved successful. In early 2011, community interviews showed that CBI was better meeting the needs of El Monte, and was on the path toward achieving long-term positive change. Future initiatives may benefit from having periods of reflection and intentional changes in strategy that are informed by the communities where they are being implemented. It is also important to clearly communicate to all stakeholders the rationale for change in direction to ensure continued buy-in and engagement.

### **Understand and Respect Local Politics, Culture and History**

CBI was meaningful to local stakeholders in part because it was relevant within the current political, cultural and historical landscape. Hiring CCF staff who were familiar with El Monte and community organizing allowed the foundation to understand how best to support this initiative without over-stepping as a funder.

Regardless of the community on which they focus, other initiatives will need to ensure that local contexts are integrated in meaningful ways. This may include investments into programs and institutions that help the community tell its own stories. Targeted grants to organizations such as La Historia Society Museum for a collection of short oral histories, and KCET to work with youth to develop blog pieces on local culture and history, helped the broader community better understand the context in which community building efforts are based.

### **Develop Public-Private Partnerships**

The initiative benefited from robust engagement with the public sector, including government and school districts. But it fell short in developing an engagement strategy for private sector partners. A CBI Advisory Committee was developed to engage the community, without an emphasis on fundraising and marketing. Doing both engagement and fundraising successfully is challenging. Community-building initiatives should take into account the goals of the effort and develop volunteer strategies that best fit within that framework.

A few successful CBI relationship-building activities included Penske/Longo Toyota providing meeting space for capacity building meetings and bringing the executive director of the El Monte/South El Monte Chamber of Commerce to serve on the board of directors of the





El Monte Promise Foundation. These connections will be helpful to the El Monte Promise Foundation as it continues to make inroads with businesses for funding, as well as for possible mentorship and internship opportunities for El Monte's youth. Community-building stakeholders can benefit from stronger relationships with local corporations that are part of and care about the vitality of the region, but they must first develop a clear strategy on the role that businesses can play in larger systems change, beyond funding.

### **Deploy a Different Approach to Grantmaking**

CBI broke away from traditional grantmaking and funder roles in several ways. After evaluations and staff changes, CCF embedded a staff member who was from El Monte to serve and read the pulse of the community. This was a first for the foundation. Project Manager Frank Molina was on the ground, working closely with stakeholders daily to build trust and cement the foundation's commitment to the initiative. CCF staff member Vera de Vera was brought on as director of the initiative, which benefited from her expertise in nonprofits and community building.

CCF also disbursed small grants (\$500-25,000) that made a big difference. These were made to project-based community teams through nonprofits willing to serve as fiscal sponsors for the residents and laid the groundwork for longer-term collaborative engagement. Projects funded included community revitalization projects that improved and enhanced green space and public art in El Monte, like Mariposa Park. Funding also supported convenings, capacity building and skill development, going beyond the conventional grantmaking model.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

CCF hopes the collective impact legacy of CBI will continue long after the close of the 10-year initiative in 2016. The El Monte Promise Foundation (EMPF), publicly launched in 2014, was groomed to sustain this legacy. It is now recognized as the backbone organization for CBI's work, especially on education.

Organizational development consultants were contracted to help EMPF staff with strategic planning, board development, fundraising and grantwriting, community assessment, parent engagement and program design. Frank Molina and Vera de Vera also provided coaching to EMPF leaders, especially parents, to enhance their leadership development.

“ I saw a couple come in to start a savings account for their grandchildren. When the kids asked what they were doing, their grandmother said, ‘We’re helping save for your college. We’re putting something aside because we believe in you.’ ”

**-Francisco Arroyo**

El Monte Promise Foundation

The goals of EMPF are to:

- Foster a “cradle to college” pathway for El Monte youth;
- Bolster community engagement by providing leadership opportunities for parents and youth;
- Encourage financial literacy among residents; and
- Create and maintain the Scholars Savings Program.

As the El Monte Promise Foundation continues to mature, it will involve a broad base of parents, youth and community leaders and provide more spaces for them to exercise their leadership skills.

In this initiative, CCF saw how a collective impact framework must fit organically to the place, and not be imposed by the funder. In the case of the El Monte CBI, this approach promoted more open collaboration among residents, nonprofit organizations and system leaders. For CBI, it was important to dedicate time to relationship management and trust-building in order to effect long-term, resident-driven positive change. By doing so, CCF was able to advance the needs of the community. This report's Appendix includes more detailed information on the community's goals, results and evaluation.

The foundation's hope is that civic engagement and partnerships can be sustained by the groundwork CBI helped develop: community-driven efforts to continue to ensure that children in El Monte grow up healthier and better prepared to enter school, college and a career. Through the collective impact of a diverse set of stakeholders, the promise of a better future for El Monte's next generation shines bright.

With humility and respect for the uniqueness of El Monte as one of Los Angeles County's 88 cities, CCF now approaches "place" in new ways. For example, the foundation began examining the Southeast Los Angeles cities of Huntington Park, Bell and Maywood by participating in listening tours and talking with local leaders and other foundations that share interest in this region. Similarly, CCF staff have made frequent visits to Lancaster and Palmdale over the past three years to better appreciate the needs of the Antelope Valley. Our grantmaking is steadily increasing in this high-need, low-direct-service part of Los Angeles County.

The "lessons of El Monte" continue to benefit the foundation's understanding of community. CCF believes the lessons and benefits will flow for a very long time.

\* \* \*

## APPENDIX

Following the 2009 evaluation and eventual pivot, CBI helped the community focus on addressing education and health outcomes for El Monte's youth. Here you will read more about the goals of CBI that were developed in partnership with the community, initial results that were accomplished and the initiative's evaluation process over the 10 years.

### A. GOALS

Partnering with the community, CCF developed the following goals for the initiative in 2010:

#### **Goal #1 – Education: Build a pipeline to higher education for children and cultivate a college-going culture**

Higher education attainment in El Monte is low compared to the county, with just 11 percent of residents 25 and older holding a four-year degree.<sup>v</sup> And many of the residents are first-generation college-goers. CBI stakeholders agreed that the city needed to foster a college-going culture starting from pre-school and weave that into key moments in elementary, junior and high school. CBI hoped to instill in leaders and parents that starting conversations about college—and saving for college—during high school is too late.

Additionally, early assessments of El Monte students revealed that many were languishing in English Learner classes, which stalled their progress to become college-ready or even graduate from high school. A key strategy of CBI aimed to fix the system to better identify, support and track English Learners across the three school districts to ensure their timely progression and success.

#### **Goal #2 – Community Wellness: Ensure health care for residents and improve the city's green space**

Obesity is a serious concern for El Monte. Approximately one-third of youth in El Monte and the surrounding cities are considered obese,<sup>vi</sup> just above the California average.



Increased rates of obesity correlate with increased rates of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer, which ultimately severely tax our health care system. CBI wanted to ensure a healthy environment that provides access to health care and healthy foods, opportunities for physical activity and educational messages that can improve the overall wellbeing of a community and region.

Two major objectives of the initiative were to engage stakeholders in ensuring health care for young people—regardless of family income—and to improve the city’s green space for youth to play outdoors.

## **B. RESULTS**

Institutional and cultural changes take time, patience and a willingness to adapt. This is why many place-based initiatives like the El Monte CBI should be long-term investments that span a decade or more. There has been some early indication of success, most notably in increasing access to higher education and encouraging healthier lifestyles. Anecdotally, another major achievement of CBI has been to facilitate greater collaboration among groups that had no prior history of working together to achieve results. We have heard from stakeholders that CBI provided a safe space for school district staff, elected officials, nonprofit organizations, businesses, parents and youth to come together for the common good of their city.

Here are specific outcomes around education and health:

### **Education**

Students in El Monte have become **more college-ready in the last several years and are saving for college at higher rates** than ever before. CCF contributed to these trends by supporting existing and emerging education improvement efforts in El Monte, driven by local educators, civic leaders and parents.

In 2010, the El Monte Union High School District, Rio Hondo College and University of California, Irvine entered into an agreement known as the El Monte Pledge. The Pledge provides El Monte high school graduates one-time priority registration at Rio Hondo College and admissions to UC Irvine if they maintain a 3.0 GPA, meet graduation requirements and are UC eligible. In 2011, California State University, Los Angeles also joined the Pledge.

“One of the things that we really wanted to do was work with youth and build a pipeline to college. It was something missing in El Monte.”

**-Norma Garcia**  
El Monte Promise Foundation  
Board of Directors

With this incentive and additional support from the districts, the college enrollment rate for graduating seniors in El Monte increased from 51 percent in 2010 to 61 percent in 2014; and high school students completing A-G requirements rose from 37 percent to 44 percent.<sup>vii</sup> Since 2010, more than 6,200 English Learners were reclassified, making them more available to take A-G requirement courses, which translated into higher college enrollment.<sup>viii</sup> See Table 1 for college enrollment statistics.

**Once in college, El Monte students tended to persist better than their peers.** Rio Hondo College students from El Monte, for example, demonstrated a higher persistence rate and transfer readiness than a comparison group.<sup>ix</sup> About 43 percent of El Monte students entering Rio Hondo College in 2011 completed a certificate or an associate’s degree, and/or were transfer-ready, compared to 21 percent from the comparison group. These positive outcomes could be attributed to system improvements and culture change in El Monte schools. In addition to working with high school students, CBI focused on creating a college-going mentality beginning in pre-school or elementary school.

An enterprise that has also contributed to CBI’s education goals is the Scholars Savings Program at the El Monte Promise Foundation. It helps El Monte residents start saving for higher education long before their children or grandchildren apply to college and eliminates barriers that have traditionally kept immigrant parents from opening an account. The program assists with opening safe, FDIC-insured 529 plans with no minimum deposit or Social Security number requirements.

These plans are operated by a state educational institution, with tax advantages and other incentives to make it easier to save for college and other post-secondary training. And money saved in a 529 does not reduce benefits for families receiving state benefits. Additionally, El Monte Promise Foundation supports families through translation in Spanish and application workshops.

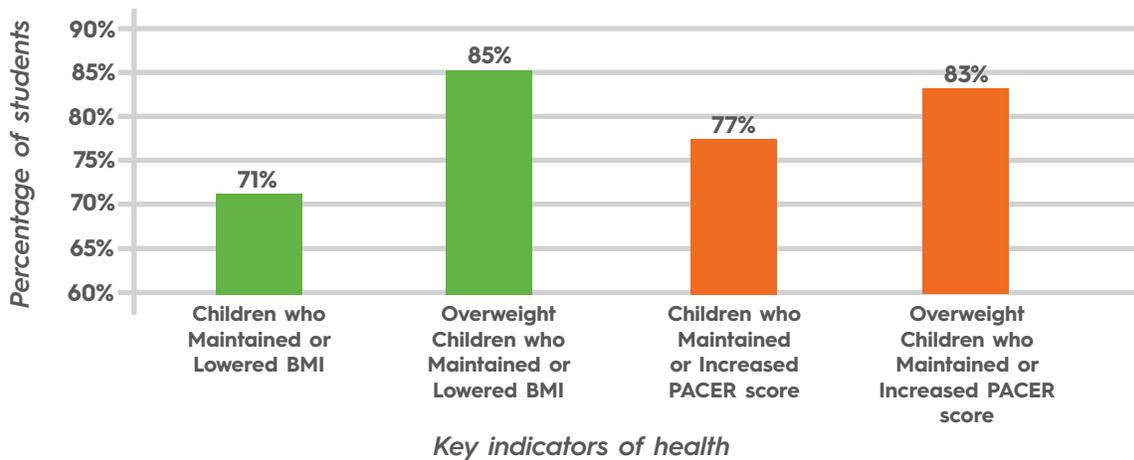
In 2015, the Scholars Savings Program and El Monte Promise Foundation were recognized by the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics as a “commitment to action.” The program is also one of only about a dozen college savings programs selected to receive matching funds from the 1:1 Fund, a national initiative by the Corporation for Enterprise Development.

**Table 1. College Enrollment of Graduating Seniors at El Monte Union High School District**

	Fall 2010		Fall 2012		Fall 2014	
Total number of graduating seniors	1,888		1,976		1,982	
Enrolled at Rio Hondo College	309	16%	539	27%	364	18%
Enrolled at Cal State LA	57	3%	84	4%	115	6%
Enrolled at UC Irvine	25	1%	69	3%	62	3%
Enrolled at other 2-year	332	18%	174	9%	425	21%
Enrolled at other 4-year	235	12%	223	11%	247	12%
Total enrolled	958	51%	1,089	55%	1,213	61%

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

Table 2. Improvements in Health (2011-15)



Source: U.S. Soccer Foundation (2015)

## Health

While health policymaking is largely the responsibility of county, state and federal governments, the El Monte CBI **helped local government entities learn about ways to incorporate health policies** into the General Plan. As a result, the City of El Monte now has an element in their General Plan that provides a policy framework for health and wellness goals and activities in the community. CCF also commissioned an assessment of school-based health programs in each of the local school districts to help uncover potential synergies and present investment opportunities for organizations wishing to partner or invest in school-based health systems.

El Monte's Soccer for Success program is a free after-school sports that program was developed during CBI in partnership with the U.S. Soccer Foundation, Our Saviour Center and two local K-8 school districts. This program helped children in El Monte get healthy and stay healthy. Communications efforts to teach youth and parents about better eating habits also played a factor in improved health outcomes. **According to program data, body mass index and PACER scores (that measure the rate of aerobic capacity) have been impacted positively.**<sup>x</sup> See Table 2 for health stats on young children enrolled in Soccer for Success.

Thanks to public awareness efforts, parents have also seen a change in nutrition as well as a deeper understanding of which foods benefit the body. Beyond traditional health outcomes, Soccer for Success supports participants' social-emotional development and keeps children off the streets and out of trouble after school.

CBI also made grants to provide health screenings and assist with health insurance enrollment. Through CBI support, the Children's Defense Fund and American Association of School Administrators helped train two school districts to refer students for affordable health coverage. Today, the Mountain View School District—serving pre-K-8th graders—has 97 percent of students covered. Their work is featured by the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as a successful model.

## C. EVALUATION

The California Community Foundation placed a high priority on evaluation and making necessary adjustments where needed throughout the 10 years of CBI. The initiative went through several milestone assessments that are outlined here:

### 2009 Preliminary Assessment

As mentioned earlier, a preliminary assessment was conducted in 2009 by the Center for Place-Based Initiatives to assess CBI to date and provide recommendations for adjustments. Following candid, one-on-one interviews with key CBI stakeholders, the report illuminated for the foundation where CBI was succeeding and more importantly, where it was failing. It resulted in several course corrections that put CBI on the path to success.

### 2011 Outcome and Process Evaluations

Two evaluations were conducted in 2011 to establish baselines for both outcomes and process. The one-year outcomes evaluation, conducted by Special Service for Groups (SSG), was intended to assess the results of grantee partners' progress toward health and education goals. Taking a participatory evaluation process, which recognizes program staff and participants as knowledge producers and experts, SSG equipped grantees with the necessary skills and understanding to fully take part in the design, measurement and interpretation of their own data. SSG says this approach increases both the perceived and real utility of the resulting data, ensuring that participants "own" the evaluation enterprise. Furthermore, it builds organizational capacity to sustain evaluation efforts beyond the first year of assistance and the life of the grant.

The process evaluation, conducted by Harder+Company Community Research, aimed to document the successes and challenges of implementing the newly refocused CBI. Evaluators conducted interviews with CCF staff and Board members and CBI Advisory Committee members; deployed an organizational survey and network analysis of organizations serving El Monte; and held a focus group with organizations that were receiving funding from CCF.

After these evaluations, it was clear that what was most helpful to CCF would be periodic assessments of the implementation and that eventual metrics around health and education would be the realm of community stakeholders implementing programs that they were designing (i.e. Soccer for Success, health insurance enrollment, English Learner support, etc.).

**“If we’re not working together, we’re missing out on a major opportunity. CBI has been the glue that’s kept us all moving together.”**

**-The Hon. Andre Quintero**  
City of El Monte Mayor

### **2014 Reflections**

The 2014 report by SSG was an interview-based model that provided further insight into some of the course corrections taken during the early years of CBI. It gathered stories of collective impact around education and health in El Monte and captured progress to date with recommendations.

### **2016 Evaluation**

The final CBI evaluation, also conducted by SSG, asked the big questions on what change occurred with regard to the community's goals around children's health and education. It outlined what worked, whether or not the collective impact model was going to be sustainable and if CCF's approach and course corrections were effective. This evaluation was also participatory based, where community members were hired to interview other community residents. This approach was very much aligned with CCF's desire to build community capacity to do community change work, including how to evaluate these efforts.

Executive summaries of SSG evaluations are available at [calfund.org/cbilibrary](http://calfund.org/cbilibrary).

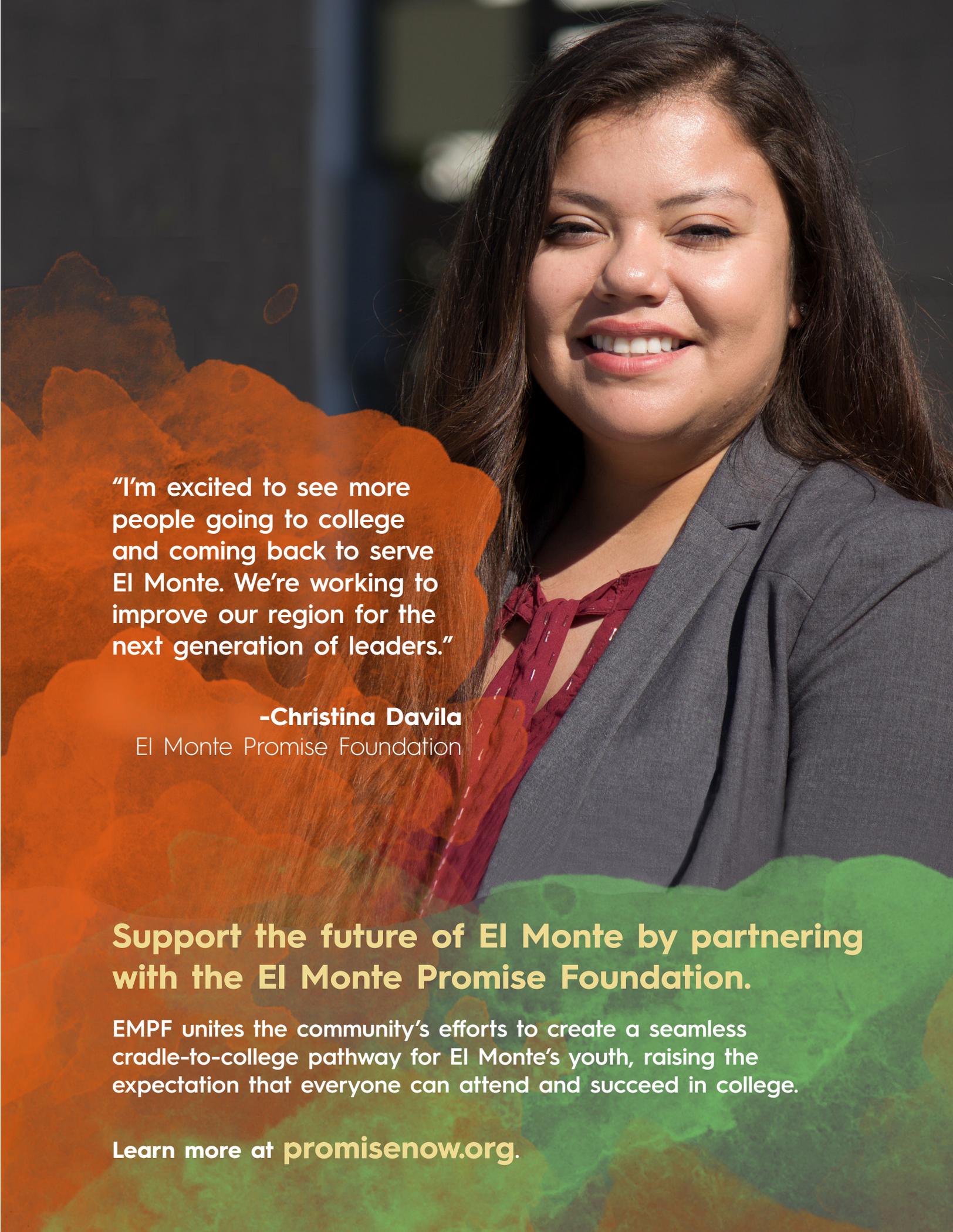


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- viii. Ibid.
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## PHOTOGRAPHY

Juan Alaniz  
Matthew Barnes  
Sam Comen



"I'm excited to see more people going to college and coming back to serve El Monte. We're working to improve our region for the next generation of leaders."

**-Christina Davila**

El Monte Promise Foundation

**Support the future of El Monte by partnering with the El Monte Promise Foundation.**

EMPF unites the community's efforts to create a seamless cradle-to-college pathway for El Monte's youth, raising the expectation that everyone can attend and succeed in college.

Learn more at [promisefoundation.org](https://promisefoundation.org).

# Building Los Angeles Together

## California Community Foundation

221 S. Figueroa St., Suite 400

Los Angeles, CA 90012

[p] 213.413.4130 [f] 213.383.2046

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