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# Expanding The Evidence Universe

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Doing Better By Knowing More

Center  
for the  
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of  
Social  
Policy

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**R**esearch and experience over the past two decades have produced more knowledge than ever before about what it takes to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children and families. But despite the nation's expanded knowledge, we have not been successful in achieving significantly better outcomes at a magnitude that matches the need in critical areas such as healthy births, school readiness, school achievement, physical and mental health, and safe neighborhoods. Among the many reasons for this is one for which the levers for change are clearly visible: our failure to marshal the full extent of available knowledge, to apply it to complex problems, and to generate new knowledge from the most ambitious efforts underway to address our toughest social problems.

In the hope of minimizing risks of squandering precious resources, leading public and philanthropic funders are constructing a framework for what is considered credible evidence that wisely raises the emphasis on using evidence to guide investments. However, we suggest that the boundaries which the prevailing framework draws around acceptable evidence too greatly limit the knowledge base available to policy makers, funders, program designers, and evaluators.

Programs and practices that are proven through experimental methods are an important component of effective interventions, but to achieve significantly better outcomes on a larger scale, they are best seen as a take-off point rather than the final destination. Our commitment to ensuring that practices, policies, and strategies are "evidence-based" must be undiminished, but our definition of what counts as credible evidence must expand. Especially at this time of severe pressure to use scarce resources prudently, we must make use of all the knowledge we can muster—from multiple sources—to maximize the impacts of public and philanthropic investments.

**Accordingly, we propose a five-part set of concrete actions that the philanthropic, public, non-profit, academic, business and entrepreneurial sectors can take to build a wider and deeper evidence base** that we believe would contribute to substantially improved outcomes for disadvantaged children, families, and neighborhoods.

### **1. Combine findings from research, theory, practice, and evaluation to promote more informed decision-making**

The idea that our knowledge about what works should come primarily from evaluations of a relatively small number of flagship programs does not take us far enough. These findings are the start of a knowledge base. The proven programs that exist today, even when scaled up, cannot achieve the magnitude of impact needed to change outcomes for the most disadvantaged children, families, and neighborhoods.

To generate the most useful guidance on where governments, philanthropies, and local reformers should direct their efforts and resources in order to improve outcomes widely and substantially, we must combine the findings from evaluation with findings from other research, theory, and practice.

### **2. Become more strategic to support successful implementation and scale-up**

By looking at effective programs and strategies not just individually but also in clusters with similar goals, we can identify the common elements that contribute to success; these may turn out to be even more useful in helping communities know what to do as they adapt elements of proven programs to complex and evolving situations. Knowing the common factors of what works to achieve specified results would enable

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providers, funders and community leaders to use the best evidence from prior efforts, improve on past practices and engage in continuous cycles of innovating, testing, retesting, and reassessing to make sure that implementation is optimal and that outcomes are achieved in the face of changing client characteristics, evolving economic and social environments, and new learning.

Syntheses of knowledge about *what has worked*, and *how*, will help to make interventions more effective, will make implementation stronger, and will expand opportunities for successful scale-up.

The next generation of efforts to achieve transformative outcomes is likely to involve not only replication of individual model programs but also the more difficult task of building innovatively on effective current programs. This will involve strategically adding missing pieces and linking effective programs and programmatic strategies—to each other, to reformed systems, and to an “infrastructure for change” with the capacity to monitor, improve, and sustain them at high quality—all in the interests of addressing the needs of more people more effectively and improving results for whole populations.

The “wicked” problems that face us today tend to be caused by such complex forces that their course cannot be changed by isolated interventions. They require multiple stakeholders working together, over many years, with a shared commitment to common results, so that the resources and authority necessary to bring about the needed changes can be mobilized and successfully applied.

### 3. Obtain richer evidence from complex interventions

The solutions to today’s complex problems reach across multiple sectors and involve actions at many levels; they require a common agenda, a shared commitment to results by multiple stakeholders, regular measurement and feedback about progress, continuous communication and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants. These efforts can also contribute to the next generation of complex solutions if we mine them for all the learning and knowledge they can produce.

The randomized control trial is a powerful research design for some purposes. It can establish the efficacy of selected components of practice, as has been shown by its use in the medical field and its application to interventions that are conceptually neat, with a clear causal relationship to the outcome of interest. However, when causal connections are more diffuse, intertwined, and otherwise difficult to establish, we need not give up on assessing effectiveness. Rather, we must agree that the value of many kinds of interventions can be assessed, weighed, understood, and acted upon without having to be proven through experimental methods.

It is possible to put together rigorously developed data, even about complex interventions, that can lead to informed judgments about which interventions are most likely to be effective, which are probably less effective, and how to support the continuous improvement of the former.

We identify these elements of a pragmatic approach to evaluating complex interventions:

- begin with a results framework;
- use strong theory to connect activities to results;
- expect to compare results, but don’t expect to find a perfect comparison group that would prove causality;
- use multiple evaluation methods that align with the multiple purposes of evaluation, the nature of the intervention, and the stages of implementation.

#### 4. Create an expanded learning framework and manage to results

The idea that nothing is worth knowing unless you know it for certain has its place, but not when applied to complex social programs and policies. We can learn so much, including about program effectiveness, without insisting on absolute proof.

Valuable “real-time” learning can be generated from complex interventions as part of the day-to-day management of the work by developing a results framework that focuses on well-being outcomes for children and families; tracking progress toward those results; and using the data to continuously shape, drive, and improve efforts. When the process of managing to results, and the learning that accompanies it, is adopted by many partners and adhered to across multiple service systems, it becomes a method of achieving truly ambitious improvements in child and family well-being.

Shifting to a more results-oriented, comprehensive, and integrative accountability system will require investment in: (1) ongoing community capacity to gather, analyze, and process data needed for decisions across systems and sectors; (2) people with the skills and expertise to staff processes by which multiple partners review data and experience, learn from it, and chart their future course; (3) the capacity of neighborhood residents to be influential leaders in this process; and (4) links to citywide, regional, state and federal decision-makers who control many of the resources needed to achieve results.

#### 5. Strengthen measurement for accountability and learning

The paucity of good measurement tools is a formidable barrier to maintaining accountability, managing by results, continuously improving quality, and assessing impact in complex initiatives. If high-quality, widely accepted, readily understood, user-friendly and reliable performance measures and indicators of population-level change are to be available where they are most needed, philanthropy (initially) and the public sector (eventually) must become more intentional about investment in developing appropriate data sources, indicators, and measures by:

- Developing appropriate measures for smaller geographic units, because few indicators are uniformly available to cities, neighborhoods, and other small areas where place-based reforms operate;
- Developing metrics to capture all critical areas of work; and because what gets measured gets done, striving for as much clarity about what to measure as about how to measure;
- Creating appropriate interim measures and helping funders and political leaders understand why they should attend to incremental signs of progress as milestones on the way to results that take longer to achieve; and
- Helping all stakeholders to emphasize and work with shared results, contributions, accountability, and measurement frameworks.

**If the pragmatic, inclusive approach to evidence advocated in this paper is to take root and flourish, we believe that public and private funders must take the following steps:**

- A. Support knowledge collection, analyses, and evidence syntheses that yield a more complete body of evidence.
- B. Ensure that state- and community-level initiatives can generate rigorous new evidence
- C. Accelerate the development of the tools and capacities that will help local communities generate new knowledge at greater scale.

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- D.** Working with the evaluation community, continue to expand the menu of available evaluative techniques that can be matched to different types of interventions and different needs to know.

The debate about criteria for credible evidence is neither academic nor trivial. How we as a nation deal with issues of evidence will shape the nature of social innovation, programs, and policies— what is and what is not allowed, promoted, and incentivized—for years to come.

Too much potential for innovation, and for improved outcomes, will be lost if we continue to define credible evidence too narrowly. Effectively addressing poverty, inadequate education, joblessness, and years of disinvestment in low-income communities will require using all the evidence we now have and an aggressive, rigorous and inclusive approach to gathering new evidence about the nuanced and powerful strategies for change that are emerging.

We hope that this paper contributes new ideas to the discussion and moves us toward common ground on all the ways we can use today’s ever-expanding knowledge, and continue to generate more.

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