

Program Design Roadmap: Helping Leaders Prepare to Drive Change in Early Childhood Care and Learning





Designing and implementing relevant, effective programs for social impact leaders requires putting the needs of people at the center of the planning process. To prepare leaders in early childhood care and learning to drive systems change, Arabella Advisors and the Packard Foundation engaged in an inclusive research and design process that amplified these leaders' voices and built upon the knowledge and capacities of existing partners and platforms. Our approach exemplifies use of the 3P's framework which we have developed to help ensure effective strategic implementation through alignment of the People, Partners, and Platforms needed to drive change.¹

Well-prepared early childhood leaders motivate and inspire their teams, lead more resilient and effective organizations, and mobilize their communities to create systemic change. Yet effective, well-resourced leadership development programs are scarce and scattered. Years of investing in early childhood care and education had made clear to program officers from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) and Organizational Effectiveness (OE) teams that the field's leaders face a host of complex challenges. Arabella Advisors and the Packard Foundation set out to change this by exploring the national landscape of relevant leadership development offerings, learning about leadership development needs directly from early childhood care and learning professionals in California, and identifying the right partners to

advance essential training. Grounded in this learning, the Packard Foundation and its new implementation partner, Rockwood Leadership Institute, are poised to pilot a leadership development program for early childhood professionals in 2020.

As the Arabella team knows from many years of helping funders design and implement new strategic initiatives, how we go from idea to impact relies on our ability to effectively engage people, partners, and platforms. The journey we took to get here was as important as the outcome it will ultimately achieve. By sharing a step-by-step account of the process, we hope to help other philanthropists and change makers chart their own paths from idea to impact through strategic implementation.

¹ See *"Moving Beyond Theories of Change: A Framework for Strategic Implementation."*
https://www.arabellaadvisors.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/MovingBeyondTheoriesOfChange_071719.pdf



People

In the words of Gwen Walden, who leads Arabella’s early childhood practice, the philanthropic sector has “all too often ... underinvested in people,” even though people are the ones who “provide both the means and the motive for social-change efforts.” The Packard Foundation’s Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) program strategy deliberately puts people at the center, and is committed to ensuring that children, ages birth to five, have access to opportunities that lay the foundation for lifelong health and learning. The adults in children’s lives have a critical role to play in nurturing their growth, and to help young people thrive, we need to focus on empowering and developing their adult caregivers and educators. Strengthening the early childhood field’s leadership bench can amplify its impact and help build thriving, equitable, early childhood systems.

“Investing in leaders is a critical strategy in helping organizations achieve greater impact. Cohort-based programs that build strong networks are especially powerful and create positive, lasting ripple effects in the field.”

– Jean Ries,

Program Officer, Organizational Effectiveness, The Packard Foundation

From the beginning of our work, we decided to focus our research, program design, and implementation efforts on the people who have both the means and the motive to drive change in early childhood care and education: the professionals who work in the field every day.



Visionaries, Managers, and Makers

To create systems-level change, we need to empower the visionaries, managers, and makers who occupy unique and critical roles within an ecosystem.² Gwen Walden defines these roles as follows:

Visionaries are the executives, board members, and/or community advocates and organizers who provide the vision, voice, and inspiration that fuel the social change over sustained periods of time. Managers are the skilled planners who determine and control the resources required to act. Makers are the people who make the change: They are doers who take the actions required, make decisions on the ground, and respond in real time to people and circumstances. Public policy and systems change are often driven by nonprofit visionaries, managers, and makers whose efforts lead to scalable solutions to deeply embedded social problems.



We began our inquiry by learning from established leaders (the visionaries) – academics, nonprofit leaders, policy experts, teachers, and advocates. They helped us understand the scale and scope of the early childhood field’s existing leadership development offerings, the role these programs play in helping prepare the next generation of leaders, and the content and pedagogy these programs employ. We found that leadership development programs are scarce and scattered but that, where they exist, they offer transformative opportunities for leaders to accelerate their professional growth and cultivate the skills necessary to improve outcomes for children and families. They also provide valuable networks and fertile ground to build lasting connections and identify areas for collaboration.

Our next step was to understand the nature and level of demand for leadership development from the “managers and makers” among early childhood professionals in California, the people who would likely be seeking leadership opportunities in the future. We recognized the central importance of amplifying the voices of these future leaders, so we set out to identify and hear from a diverse set of them. Among those we interviewed, some may go on to become the directors of nonprofit programs for early dual language learners, some may advocate for transformative changes in state or local policy, others may lead resource and referral networks, and still others might lead public school districts. Collectively, they helped us understand which skills and competencies would help them fulfill their aspirations and allow them to one day achieve better results for their teams, organizations, and communities. For instance, they noted the critical importance of bridging practice and policy and becoming effective communicators and advocates beyond their classrooms and schools. Many are responsible for implementing on-the-ground changes in policy and, as such, crave opportunities to offer input that helps shape the direction of important policy measures, particularly at the local and state level.

² *Ibid.*

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Our research also revealed that leadership development programs play an important role in making the early childhood field more diverse, equitable, and inclusive, which ultimately benefits the early childhood workforce as well as the millions of children and families it serves.

To design a program that would foster equity and inclusion, we first needed to understand the systemic issues that exacerbate and perpetuate inequities in the early childhood care and learning field. Through first-hand accounts from the leaders we interviewed, we learned that early childhood professionals face unclear paths to growth, limited upward mobility, and poor compensation. These factors often lead to high rates of burnout among the teachers and caregivers these leaders manage. Early childhood leaders operate within environments constrained by unmet resource needs, especially in counties and districts primarily serving children and families experiencing severe structural disadvantages such as racism and poverty. Taken together, these challenges limit the effectiveness of leaders, organizations, and systems, and take an outsized toll on the many early childhood professionals who already face structural disadvantages.

Leadership programs can accelerate the professional trajectories of leaders from underrepresented backgrounds by helping them build knowledge, networks, and professional pedigrees. Once these leaders have paths to growth and ultimately seats at decision-making tables, they can in turn more effectively advocate for policies, resources, and practices that better serve the needs of California's diverse children and families. To prepare a diverse group of leaders to flourish, a leadership program would need to prioritize racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity in its cohort composition and help program participants cultivate the skills and networks needed to influence policy and resource distribution.

“My school is the epicenter of many systems of oppression that are converging. I want to think about what’s next but I don’t have the mental capacity to do so because I’m consumed with making sure that the school is a safe, vibrant, and healthy place for kids and families.”³

- Interviewee, Early Childhood Professional



³ See “Exploring Demand for Leadership Development among Leaders in Early Childhood Care and Learning” <https://www.arabellaadvisors.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Exploring-Demand-for-Leadership-Development.pdf>



Partners

Given early childhood leaders' enthusiasm and strong interest in participating in leadership development programming, the next step was to explore how to invest in such a program. Identifying the right program design and delivery partner was an essential step in translating research into action. In addition to providing the capacity for implementation, a strong partner would provide valuable new perspectives and on-the-ground expertise to help operationalize the programmatic vision.

To determine what type of partner to engage, Arabella examined a wide range of existing leadership development program models. We analyzed six local and national models in depth, with an eye toward identifying which would best align with potential participants' needs, the outcomes we and the Packard Foundation had established over the course of our collaboration, the intended timeframe for program launch, and the resources (knowledge, networks, and financial support) the foundation could bring to this new endeavor.

Given these aspirations and parameters, we determined that the best option would be to partner with an existing leadership development program with strong, California-based organizational infrastructure and social sector networks. This existing infrastructure would help the program launch quickly and would also mean it could more likely accommodate growth if it demonstrated success and wished to build capacity for additional cohorts. Ultimately, the best aligned option was to partner with Rockwood Leadership Institute, a highly regarded social impact leadership development program, and to supplement Rockwood's existing curriculum with content specific to the early childhood context.

We and the Packard Foundation team recognized the importance of taking time to build the relationship and step into the new collaboration with intentionality. We know from experience in philanthropy that power imbalances between large, institutional funders and the nonprofits they invest in can lead to less effective collaboration. Our awareness of these dynamics and Arabella's involvement throughout the transition from design to implementation helped reduce these power asymmetries.



To distill the most important concepts and help Rockwood prioritize its efforts, the Arabella team developed and shared a document with Rockwood that translated our research on early childhood leaders' needs into concrete, suggested program content and format parameters. We also held several conversations with Rockwood's staff and served as a neutral sounding board as they began to think through how to best lay the foundation for their work. This created a safe environment for Rockwood to ask candid questions, learn about the Packard Foundation's priorities and work style, and begin to absorb the early childhood field-specific findings we had uncovered.



Platforms

Funders can utilize a range of legal and organizational structures to achieve their social impact goals, and we see philanthropists exploring an increasingly wide range of tactics and vehicles to do so. In many cases, though, a simple grant to a nonprofit organization can be the most streamlined approach.

Due to the complexity of designing this new leadership development program, the Foundation chose to offer Rockwood a planning grant to support the organization in conducting a deeper program design and curriculum development process. This investment up-front helped Rockwood carve out the staff time and effort it takes to develop a program plan that was purpose-built around the needs of potential participants and stakeholders. This phased approach to program design also offers the benefit of giving all parties the opportunity to pause and reflect at designated checkpoints along the way, ultimately building greater alignment among stakeholders.

“Engaging with a range of trusted advisors in the field, including potential program participants, during the planning process built confidence in our approach and has set us and our implementation partner up for greater impact.”

– Jeff Sunshine

Program Officer and Manager, Children, Families, Communities, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation



Takeaways from the Process

While this collaboration with Packard was specifically oriented toward supporting leaders in the early childhood field, we learned valuable lessons that are relevant to many funders contemplating investments in new programs and initiatives across issue areas:



“Nothing about us without us”:

Programs will be more relevant and impactful when potential participants play in a role in shaping them. In one of our first meetings with a group of leaders in the early childhood field, a participant who had launched a thriving academic program for early childhood professionals reiterated this adage. In this case, early childhood professionals’ perspectives and needs have figured centrally in determining program outcomes, content, format, and cohort composition.



Be humble about your limitations as a funder and identify partners who fill in your gaps:

As we know, successful change efforts require the expertise of many people from various disciplines and level of responsibility. In this case, the Packard Foundation helped drive the vision: its depth of knowledge and networks in early childhood systems and ability to mobilize financial resources were critical in identifying and responding to the field’s need. Rockwood is helping to manage and drive the work forward: its years of on-the-ground leadership development expertise and existing training infrastructure will play a complementary and vital role in establishing this program.



Consider offering funding for nonprofits’ planning and proposal development time:

To develop complex, cohort-based programs, we recommend that philanthropists consider providing planning grants to help their partners prepare for the full design and implementation of the program. Funding planning efforts helps ensure nonprofits are adequately resourced and prepared to lay the foundation for successful and strategically aligned implementation.

About Arabella Advisors

Wherever you are on your philanthropic journey, Arabella offers advisors who understand the problem you seek to solve and the complex network of people, institutions, and investment vehicles that can help you address it. Whether you want to launch a global movement, more effectively manage your existing work, better understand your outcomes, or amplify them with Arabella's advocacy, impact investing, and donor partnership platforms, we can guide you forward.

Your philanthropic investments are too important, and the need too great, to get bogged down. So let's get there faster. Let's get there smarter. Let's go from idea to impact.

From **Idea**
to **Impact**



Questions? Thoughts?
Additional ideas on creating philanthropic impact?

Connect with us online through any of the following channels:

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