

EDUCATION PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation envisions children and youth developing the knowledge, skills, and character to explore and understand the world around them, growing into caring, informed, and productive adults. This snapshot, prepared as the Foundation nears conclusion in 2020, documents essential aspects of the National Character Initiative.



S. D. BECHTEL, JR.
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Recognizing that adults – both in and out of the classroom – play a pivotal role in building character in young people, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation invests in youth-serving organizations in California and across the nation that are committed to using data to improve and sustain the character development practices of adult staff and volunteers.

Goal

Engage with youth-serving partners to identify “what works” with respect to adult practices that build youth character, and help translate this knowledge into practice through training and professional development for adult staff and volunteers.

Approach

- ▶ Develop knowledge of evidence-based practice for the field.
- ▶ Honor the diversity and overlap in character development approaches – including youth development and social-emotional learning.
- ▶ Invest in systems to support effective practice by adult staff and volunteers in a variety of learning environments.
- ▶ Invest in elevating high-quality character development practices.
- ▶ Invest in intermediary nonprofits and consultants to support leadership development and connect research to practice in collaboration with youth-serving organizations.
- ▶ Activate field leaders and advocates to influence federal and state policy in support of character development programs.

Progress

✓ **\$130 million was invested in national youth-serving organizations, building both the organizations’ as well as the field’s capacity around character programming, measuring and continuously improving adult practice, policy and advocacy, and equity.**

- National youth-serving organizations have built robust learning cultures with the capacity to make meaning of data and make data-informed decisions. Through staff and youth surveys, these organizations understand which types of professional development supports lead to higher quality programs; several organizations completed research projects that show how their programs lead to increased resilience, executive function, self-control, positive behavior, and other advantages among the youth they serve.
- At the request of grantees, the Foundation offered in-person, facilitated learning experiences on how to address diversity, equity, and inclusion within grantee organizations’ cultures, structures, and services. Grantee interest also led to Foundation funding for internal analysis and strategy formation to advance each organization’s progress toward fulfilling its equity values.



Lessons Learned

The Foundation's experience with the National Character Initiative yields lessons that may benefit other funders:

- ▶ **Use introductory grants to learn.** Small initial grants helped the Foundation and grantees create rapport and trust, boosting shared understanding of context, challenges, organizational strengths, and approaches prior to making multi-year commitments.
- ▶ **Ensure continuity of funding to enable organizational change.** The Foundation supported continuity of this work through multi-year grants; these investments align with the overarching strategies of the Foundation and each respective grantee organization.
- ▶ **Anchor the grant relationship in trust.** Foundation staff listened and worked closely with organizations to build grants that were nested within the context of a trusting relationship.
- ▶ **Invest in progress and opportunities for greater impact.** Additional funds were provided as grantees reached milestones, encountering new obstacles and identifying important new bodies of work – including the need to address inequities both within their national offices and across their respective affiliate networks.
- ▶ **Engage with other grantmakers.** The Foundation actively collaborated with other funders, pursuing coordination across grantmaking strategies and making grantee introductions when appropriate to encourage more support for the field.
- ▶ **Foster peer connections and learning.** As the Initiative unfolded, opportunities were created to nurture relationships and support peer-alike exchange across the cohort. Based on grantee interests, communities of practice were formed in three arenas: programming and practice, research and evaluation, and policy. The Foundation also supported relationship development and collaboration among the leaders of participating youth-serving organizations – many of whom had few prior opportunities to connect with one another.
- ▶ **Provide access to expertise.** Professionals with discipline-specific knowledge and experience in the youth development field helped grantees develop systems and strategies that supported their respective missions. Areas of focus included integrating equity into implementation models, financial analysis and business/strategic planning, and storytelling.

Opportunities

Whole child education is gaining national attention and support.

The Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development 2019 report, "A Nation at Hope", lays out recommendations for policy, research, and practice agendas that support whole child education based on the science of learning and development.

Collaboration among youth-serving organizations is growing.

Their efforts derive from peer exchange and relationship development, and increasingly feature national-level advocacy for young people, ranging from joint presentations to policymakers and funders to public will building campaigns. For example, CEOs joined together to catalyze a coordinated messaging campaign, *Be a Champion, #InvestInKids*.

Resources

- Foundation staff contributed strategies and perspective to two articles in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Youth Development* (March 2020) and co-authored a chapter in the book, *Social and Emotional Learning in Out of School Times: Foundations and Futures* (2018), drawing insights from the National Character Initiative. Specific foci include building the capacity of the youth-serving workforce, building a statewide strategy to promote social and emotional development, and the role philanthropy can play in increasing visibility for and improving the impact of adults whose work is crucial to youth development.
- Foundation staff authored a chapter on evaluation in the upcoming book *Measuring, Use, Improve!* (Fall 2020) as part of Information Age Publishing's series titled, "Current Issues in Out of School Time."
- A study on the learnings, reflections, and impact of the Foundation's National Character Initiative (both from Foundation staff and grantees) is being conducted by the American Institutes for Research; release is slated for Fall 2020.

