

## Navigating the Labyrinth

To develop best practices and identify effective strategies for building early-learning systems, Helios commissioned an evaluation of some of its early-learning investments in select Florida communities. The question to be answered was, “Are these communities able to collaborate and develop effective, measurable strategies that are strengthening the local early childhood system?”

### **The following activities occurred as part of the evaluation:**

- Teacher and administrator surveys
- Teacher pre- and post-assessments
- Teacher and coach focus groups
- Interim reports
- Review of materials
- Bi-weekly meetings, and
- Site visits

Through this evaluation process, many on-the-ground challenges grantees face rose to the surface, including limited project management capacity, challenges implementing professional-development strategies, staff turnover and missed opportunities for local collaboration.

The evaluation also yielded encouraging results such as the quality of communication between partners, increased engagement of local stakeholders and the ability for grantees to participate as thought leaders in the initiatives.

The evaluation revealed one challenging issue and that was the labyrinth of unaligned early childhood education assessment tools being used in the field. These tools are often designed for specific purposes but the resulting data is not shared to improve or inform teaching practices.

The work also highlights the challenges posed by a labyrinth of unaligned early childhood education assessment tools being used in the field. These tools are often designed for specific purposes but the opportunity to use resulting data to improve or inform teaching practices is often missed.

In response, the Foundation, the University of South Florida and the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County hosted an early childhood assessment convening in Tampa, Florida, bringing together locally and nationally recognized experts and practitioners who looked closely at the availability, appropriateness, limitations, alignment and future direction of early childhood assessments, particularly as they relate to use in program evaluations and statewide school-readiness policy and practice.

The convening created a broader opportunity for new research to inform the field by exploring the use of assessment instruments, identifying ways to redesign professional development to address the inherent challenges in the field and exploring capacity-building opportunities within the field.

The Foundation will continue to work collaboratively with its partners and local, state and national experts to incubate these concepts and identify ways to build better and inform effective early childhood education systems.