



Early Wins in Early Childhood

A CASE STUDY IN SEEDING SYSTEMS CHANGE

About FSG

FSG is a mission-driven consulting firm supporting leaders in creating large-scale, lasting social change. Through strategy, evaluation, and research we help many types of actors —individually and collectively—make progress against the world's toughest problems.

Our teams work across all sectors by partnering with leading foundations, businesses, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. We seek to reimagine social change by identifying ways to maximize the impact of existing resources, amplifying the work of others to help advance knowledge and practice, and inspiring change agents around the world to achieve greater impact.

As part of our nonprofit mission, FSG also directly supports learning communities, such as the Collective Impact Forum, the Shared Value Initiative, and the Impact Hiring Initiative to provide the tools and relationships that change agents need to be successful.

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INTRODUCTION: A SYSTEMS CHANGE EFFORT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

In mid-2015, the Hampton Roads Community Foundation began to explore the feasibility of achieving systems change in early care and education with collective impact. Through a multi-sector scoping, visioning, and planning process that engaged nearly 100 stakeholders, **Minus 9 to 5 | Preparing Families from Conception to Kindergarten** was born in the summer of 2016. Since then, the initiative has learned valuable lessons and catalyzed several systems changes, which are detailed in this case study.

KEY FACTS

Initiative Name: Minus 9 to 5

Year formed: 2016

Vision: Each family in Hampton Roads will be equipped and supported to raise children who are healthy, thriving, and ready to learn

Geography: Five communities in Southeast Virginia (Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach)

Impact Area: Families and their children from prenatal to age 5

THE PROBLEM AND OPPORTUNITY

Each year, over 15,000 babies are born in Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach, Virginia. Baseline data collection revealed that many of these babies start life with significant family and health challenges:

- 10 percent of newborns have low birth weights that cause health complications.
- More than 130 infants die each year before they reach their first birthday.
- 40 percent of newborns will be raised by single women.
- Up to 57 percent of children in the region live in households earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.
- Nearly 50 percent of children will spend their first five years in informal or unregulated childcare.
- An estimated 34 percent will likely not be kindergarten-ready in literacy, math, or socio-emotional skills.

Taken together, these data point to the need for a holistic approach that considers the needs of children and their families from conception through kindergarten, and that engages with a broad array of stakeholders who work with families, such as hospitals, churches, employers, and childcare providers from a variety of types of care.

Luckily, the region is home to many programs that can help, but it has lacked coordination as well as knowledge of and access to services. **Minus 9 to 5** was created to connect these dots by fostering a stronger understanding of the early care system and what its different partners do: building deeper connections between organizations serving children and their families through communication and collaboration; and facilitating the alignment of priorities and activities.

GETTING STARTED

The Hampton Roads Community Foundation began with a feasibility study to answer two key questions on scope and readiness:

1. What could an initiative desiring systems change in early care and education focus on in terms of age range, family demographics, geography, and specific early care and education issues?
2. Are the conditions in place to pursue a collective approach, including local champions, urgency for change, available resources, and desire to collaborate among key actors in the early care and education system?

To answer these questions, the foundation worked with FSG to:

- Analyze publicly available data to understand the local early care and education context.
- Facilitate a scoping workshop with 20 stakeholders to arrive at an early hypothesis for what a systems change initiative could focus on.
- Gather input from 45 practitioners and 50 parents via in-person interviews and focus groups.
- Facilitate feedback sessions and workshops with participants to vet the conclusions drawn from the feasibility study process.

The feasibility assessment yielded positive results: Stakeholders agreed to an initial scope for the initiative and confirmed that all of the conditions for collaborative systems change were in place. Based on this, a steering committee and backbone support structure were developed. The backbone and steering committee worked together for over six months to create a vision, guiding principles, a strategic framework for action, and shared measures.

STRUCTURING FOR COLLABORATIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE

The initiative was designed to be carried out by several interconnected structures, collectively comprising dozens of individuals and organizations:

Steering Committee: Meets monthly to set the strategic direction and goals of the initiative, makes key decisions, gives feedback on and prioritizes implementation of ideas generated by working groups, and guides the backbone on strategic priorities.

Working Groups: Meet monthly to develop and implement concrete ideas and action plans related to their six strategy areas, and include one or two steering committee members as co-chairs to ensure information flow.

Backbone: Serves as the coordination entity for the entire initiative, with two full-time staff members managing interactions among and within all of the structures listed above, as well as being the public face of the initiative.

Leadership Council: Once created, it will meet a few times per year to serve as champion and advocate for the initiative, helping to ensure that strategies and ideas receive political support, resources, and public backing.



BUILDING THE CONDITIONS FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT

1. COMMON AGENDA

The steering committee, under the guidance of the backbone leader, developed the common agenda over a six-month period in 2016. The input received by the 45 practitioners and 50 parents during the feasibility study laid the groundwork for many aspects of the common agenda, including the vision:

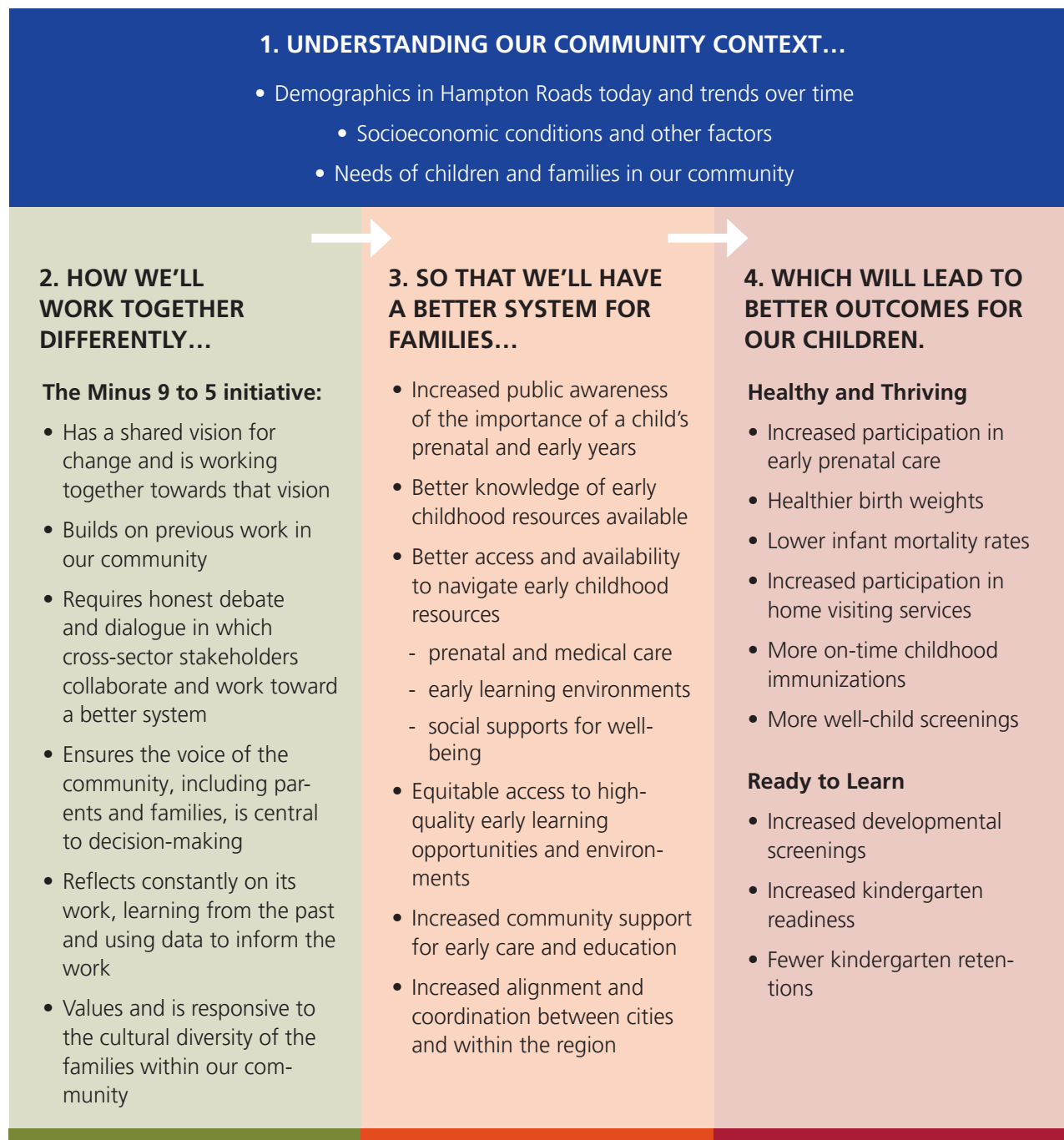
Each family in Hampton Roads will be equipped and supported to raise children who are healthy, thriving, and ready to learn.

The steering committee also agreed on concrete goals for the early care and education system:

- Availability of and equal access to high-quality programs and services for each child and family
- A child- and family-centered, solutions-oriented approach to meeting the needs of children and families
- Cultural relevance, appreciating the uniqueness of each child and family
- Coordination and seamlessness, reinforcing complementary strengths across the region
- Improved outcomes, sharing information and data transparently

2. SHARED MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

The steering committee developed a four-part framework based on the **Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact** and agreed on concrete measures to assess. Moreover, baseline data for each of the outcomes was collected with the support of the Data and Knowledge Sharing working group.



3. MUTUALLY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES

Central to **Minus 9 to 5** is a community-focused approach with more than 100 stakeholders including parents, caregivers, health professionals, nonprofit leaders, government officials, business leaders, and educators. Together, they are identifying and implementing solutions for a stronger system that promotes the success of all area children and families through six working groups:

Thriving Families: Equip families with the knowledge, resources, and validation they need to develop their full potential as nurturing caregivers.

Healthy Homes, Healthy Children: Improve prenatal care, ensuring access to proven interventions for health and education, and create a culture that welcomes and supports new parents.

Early Learning and Development: Improve the quality and economics of early learning environments through dedicated efforts to strengthen the access to and ensure the impact of learning opportunities in the early years.

Community Connections: Coordinate and align services and providers across the region to promote education, health, and social services for young children and their families.

Data and Knowledge Sharing: Develop and share data for internal and external audiences on the progress that is being made and on best practices to adopt.

Policy and Advocacy: Mobilize supporters, build public will, and identify and advocate for policies that improve early care and education.

4. CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION

While each of the working groups focuses on a dedicated scope of work, the backbone ensures that interconnections occur and dots are constantly being connected among them and the other structures of the initiative, such as the steering committee and working groups. Project management software has been instrumental in communication between working group members and in keeping working documents organized. Stakeholders broadly interested in the initiative receive targeted communications throughout the year.

5. BACKBONE SUPPORT

The process of building out backbone support for **Minus 9 to 5** was based on first identifying the right leaders and then identifying a home in an existing community-based organization. A multi-stakeholder hiring committee recruited an executive director and program coordinator. This two-person staff spent the first 18 months docked at the Hampton Roads Community Foundation. At the same time, a backbone design committee determined the best organizational home for the backbone. Because of the important role of the health system in early care and education, Eastern Virginia Medical School was chosen as the home for **Minus 9 to 5**. As part of this move, the executive director of **Minus 9 to 5** was added to the faculty of the medical school as an assistant professor.



YEAR ONE SYSTEMS CHANGE PROGRESS HIGHLIGHTS

STRENGTHENING STATEWIDE RELATIONSHIPS

The initiative took advantage of every opportunity to share information with and reestablish a communication pipeline to state-level organizations. **Minus 9 to 5** is now considered a partner and included in opportunities with the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation. This has led to opportunities in networking, collaboration, and support from other coalitions throughout the state as well as with the Virginia Department of Social Services, Early Childhood Mental Health Virginia, Early Impact Virginia, and the Virginia Chapter of the March of Dimes.

FORGING ALIGNMENT AROUND KINDERGARTEN REGISTRATION

The Community Connections working group has been successful in bringing the five local school divisions together to develop opportunities for regional alignment for kindergarten registration and transition practices. By creating a more aligned process, the initiative can launch community-level messages to help parents get information about how and when to register. A goal of the working group is to identify a regional day of enrollment.

LAUNCHING A SHARED CAMPAIGN AROUND SAFE SLEEP

As the region suffered from the highest number of infant deaths related to unsafe sleep practices in Virginia, the Healthy Homes, Healthy Children working group brought together nine local hospitals, the medical school, five departments of public health, and five departments of social services to develop a unified, regional **infant safe sleep** effort. By sharing the same message, working together to spread education and support for safe sleep, and engaging other partners to join, this effort can succeed at scale.

COORDINATING INFORMATION RELATED TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Early Learning and Development working group developed a regional list of professional development, training, and educational opportunities for local childcare providers. Because of the challenge providers often find in having to look in multiple places for training opportunities, this regional list provides a process for easier access to the trainings providers are looking for, categorized by price (free, fee-based), type (face-to-face, online), location, and topic area.

ENHANCING AND SPREADING THE USE OF A KEY COMMUNITY RESOURCE PORTAL

The Thriving Families and Community Connections working groups have been focused on ensuring families have access to local resources. Building on an existing local resource database, **Kids Priority One**, the groups implemented a participatory process for providing feedback and input on a redesign of the site, including making it mobile friendly. They also developed and distributed an infographic to share the site with families and the community. The partner organizations facilitated a significant community push to share information about Kids Priority One to ensure all of the community service providers were aware of this valuable resource and using it with their clients.



FIVE LESSONS LEARNED

1. FOCUS RELENTLESSLY ON BUILDING AND NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS

Building relationships is the most important aspect in systems change.

Stakeholders must have trust in and relationships with one another to be open to honest discussion and meaningful debate. Connecting and engaging stakeholders is an on-going process. Meeting people, telling them what you are doing, and networking with stakeholders to find out who else you need to bring into the initiative takes time, but is the only way to build a strong group of supporters.

Parents are the key stakeholders in the work of early childhood systems change,

but can be challenging to adequately involve. Those who live in or on the edge of poverty have many factors which make engagement difficult. In order to have parents participate, **Minus 9 to 5** had to consider each parent's 1) transportation to the meeting, 2) other parental obligations, to ensure a meeting time that didn't interfere, 3) childcare needs, 4) capacity to feel comfortable and equipped to join in the discussion, and 5) characteristics that gave them credibility to represent the larger target population.

Building relationships and working across multiple cities is challenging,

but worth the effort. Sharing information across geographies is worth the struggle of bringing multiple municipalities together. Stakeholders regularly acknowledged the worth of knowing more about what's happening in the region. This learning helped keep people coming back to the meetings.

2. BE SYSTEMATIC, AND PATIENT, ABOUT ANCHORING STAKEHOLDERS IN SYSTEMS

Getting people to fully understand and be committed to systems work is not easy. Most people are familiar with direct service and quick wins. Slow, collaborative, systems-thinking work is arduous, but well worth the time it takes to bring stakeholders on board.

When initially engaging stakeholders, having a good way to help them understand systems building versus developing programs is critical. In initial meetings, **Minus 9 to 5** reviewed the initiative’s vision, goals, guiding principles, and shared metrics (the core elements of the common agenda) *each time* as a way to keep participants focused on the work. Staff describe the common agenda as a “job description” to help keep everyone focused in the same direction. They developed placemats with all of the key common agenda information for working group members to keep front and center during meetings. As a way to help members move away from their organizational perspectives and the question of “*What is my organization going to get out of this?*” the initiative encourages participants to remove their organizational lens and instead ask, “*What does my organization have to contribute to building a better system for children and families?*” In order to understand perspectives from all parts of the system, it is critical for participants to move out of the status quo they operate in—which is more challenging than it sounds.

Systems work is slow-moving, and people involved must have an appetite for patience. Some people thought **Minus 9 to 5** was going to move the shared measures quickly. The initiative had to explain that they first have to understand the community context (through the feasibility assessment and collection of baseline shared metrics data), then work together cohesively (e.g., by forming and nurturing the initiative’s many structures) so that together everyone can build a better system and that all of that will *eventually* lead to affecting the lives of children. This takes years. **Minus 9 to 5** does not expect to see significant progress on population-level impacts until 2022.

3. BUILD THE BACKBONE VERY DELIBERATELY

Selecting the right place to house the initiative is important. FSG suggested housing the effort in an existing nonprofit that is neutral, centrally located, and bought into the vision rather than forming another 501(c)(3). By making a list of potential locations and listing the advantages and disadvantages of each, the right place to house the effort became quite clear and did not result in offending or alienating backbone home contenders that were not selected.

The traits of the backbone executive director are mission critical. In this case, the hiring committee certainly prioritized finding someone with expertise in early childhood education. But while domain expertise is necessary, it is not sufficient in systems change. Of equal importance is the ability to be a trusted and strong relationship builder. This means simultaneously leading while following the groups' agenda, being gracious and hospitable, resolving conflict easily, and making everyone feel empowered and supported upon resolution. In addition, the executive director also needs to be willing to roll up their sleeves to simply get the day-to-day work done—willing to give their all but also practice self-care—and be resilient in the face of adversity. Finally, it is important to have strong organizational and written communication skills.

Hiring sequentially allows for complementarity. The initiative is fortunate to have two staff members in the backbone. Assessing the skills needed within the initiative and mapping the gaps allowed the hiring committee to determine the characteristics and skills needed for their second hire. Doing this took more time, but the payoff was huge when **Minus 9 to 5** found an individual who had strengths that complemented the executive director's. Together they are able to use their individual strengths and compensate for each other's limitations.

4. CULTIVATE FLEXIBLE FACILITATION TECHNIQUES

A strong meeting agenda is critical, but the backbone staff must have plan A, B, and C when the meeting discussion takes a turn. The art of meeting management is an essential skill for backbone staff. It is not easy to

keep the meeting productive while being responsive to conversations, navigating debate and dialogue, and moving to action. Reflection and revision on the process are also important. Staying responsive enough to adjust where necessary and maintaining enough structure to ensure progress is a delicate dance at times.

Members of the steering committee and the working groups need to understand how they each bring individual value to the work. Unless they know their importance, interest declines. With this in mind, it took **Minus 9 to 5** about six months to learn the best agenda format for the steering committee. Now, each meeting has a speaker who shares a topic of common interest to everyone present followed by brief working group reports and then a question that can be discussed during the meeting or pondered and responded to afterward. Ending a meeting on time is paramount, and including the vision statement at the bottom of the agenda keeps everyone focused on why they are participating. For working group meetings, **Minus 9 to 5** starts each meeting by stating the meeting goals and creating a space for attendees to write down their responsibilities for the next meeting at the end of each meeting. This has proven to be a great tool to help all members stay focused.



5. INVEST IN COMMUNICATIONS PLAN AND PLATFORM

Planning for communication, messaging, strategies, and multi-media channels is essential. It is difficult enough to work to engage stakeholders, get working groups up and running, and plan for strong and transparent communication. However, without strategic communications planning, the initiative will ultimately suffer. While part of a communications plan can include developing a website, be aware that it is more difficult than it seems—development often takes longer than expected, and a website’s “living” nature means that it is never complete. **Minus 9 to 5** recommends getting professional guidance on this process.

Engaging a communications specialist during the first year proved invaluable for Minus 9 to 5. The specialist was able to take the initiative through a communication planning process to identify the target audience, appropriate messaging for each audience, and methods for reaching them. She also engaged the steering committee in an exercise that allowed the members to discuss four critical questions about how steering committee members currently communicated with others about the initiative. Once that exercise was completed, all members had a clearer idea of how to be better ambassadors for **Minus 9 to 5**.

*Through a deliberate and highly inclusive process of assessing readiness, scoping an initiative, building out a backbone, and developing systems change strategies with 100 working group and steering committee members, **Minus 9 to 5** has been able to build trust, catalyze collaboration, and align actions across five cities in Virginia in the span of just two years.*

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