Learning to Adapt: Helping Agape Child & Family Services Use Rapid-Cycle Learning to Drive Equitable Change

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

COVID-19 has hit communities of color hard, deepening existing racial inequities and increasing the need for high-quality supports focused on health, education, and employment experiences and outcomes (Brown 2020; Gemelas et al. 2022). With these strains, the pandemic has stretched service delivery organizations thin. It has heightened families' existing needs and given rise to new needs, requiring programs to adapt their supports (Stagner 2020; Willenborg et al. 2021). These complex challenges have increased the need for organizations in different areas—including philanthropy, service delivery, and research—to collaborate and innovate in order to better support programs, their staff members, and the families they serve.

The Refining Virtual Services to Engage 2G families (REVISE 2G) project aimed to meet this charge. Agape Child & Family Services (Agape), the Annie E. Casey Foundation (Casey), and Mathematica partnered to help Agape, a place-based service provider in Memphis, Tennessee, strengthen its two-generation paradigm (2Gen) in the face of COVID-19 and the transition to virtual

> **Box ES.1. Agape Child & Family Services**
>
> Agape Child & Family Services is a faith-based organization with a mission of serving children and families experiencing poverty. In 2001, Agape began using a two-generation, place-based model (2Gen) to support families in the Memphis, Tennessee, area. Its 2Gen model includes a range of initiatives designed to help parents, children, and families. About 95 percent of 2Gen participants are people of color. The majority of TeamWorks participants are women in their mid-thirties, and Stars serves an equal rate of male and female students, with an average age of 15.
>
> The REVISE 2G project focused on two initiatives: Stars and TeamWorks.
>
> **Stars** is a school-based initiative to help improve student attendance and behavior. The initiative also focuses on increasing parents' participation and interest in students' achievement.
>
> **TeamWorks** focuses on employment and education supports. It connects adults to resources to help them achieve their goals.

services. The project focused on Stars, a school-based mentoring initiative for youth, and TeamWorks, a coaching initiative to help adults meet their education and employment goals (Box ES.1). Casey funded and set the vision for the work, and Agape contributed programmatic expertise and oversaw implementation of improvement strategies. Mathematica was the learning partner, contributing expertise in rapid-cycle learning, a strategy for quickly designing and testing program improvements. In addition, a broader work group, including Agape staff members, 2Gen participants, and community partners, supported the project's launch by helping to define opportunity areas.

A. The approach: Equity-driven improvement

Because of the inequities that the pandemic deepened (Brown 2020; Gemelas et al. 2022), a key charge of REVISE 2G was to use equity principles to guide the design and implementation of change efforts. The project's partners used different approaches to achieve this goal. Mathematica and Agape staff members used the Learn, Innovate, Improve approach (LI^2) to conduct the project (Figure ES.1). LI^2 is an evidence-driven framework that promotes collaboration to manage change and program improvement (Derr et al. 2017). It involves three phases: learning about opportunity areas and the environment that shapes them (Learn); co-creating solutions (Innovate); and continuously testing the solutions to make them work better and meet identified goals (Improve). We integrated equity principles into each phase of the LI^2 framework. Across all phases, we partnered with affected populations, including 2Gen participants, staff,

and community partners. In the Learn phase, we identified root causes of program barriers or challenges. In the Innovate phase, we identified solutions to these program opportunities. In the Improve phase, we continuously tested and refined solutions to understand what works, for whom, and under what circumstances.

Figure ES.1. A framework for change: Learn, Innovate, Improve
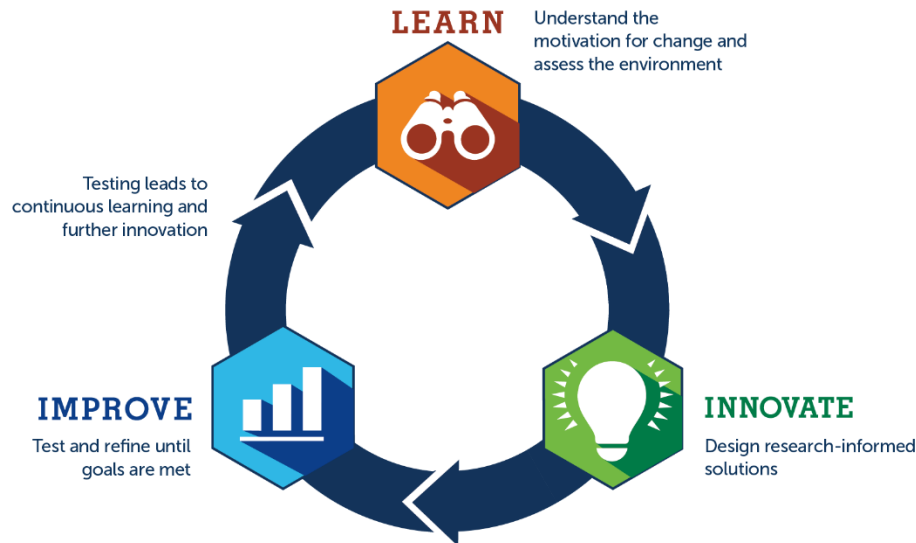
The research team elevated the voices of affected populations through two key strategies: engagement with a work group and two separate implementation teams of four or five staff from each initiative. The work group helped carry out the Learn phase, and the implementation teams helped with the Innovate and Improve phases. Throughout the project, the partners collaborated to understand the initiatives' opportunity areas, their root causes, potential solutions, and how these solutions might work for different people and in different situations.

REVISE 2G ran from October 2020 to October 2021. Key activities included the following:

- Learning about opportunities for improvement through work group meetings and interviews with staff and participants (November and December 2020)

- Developing program strategies with implementation teams to address identified opportunities (January–March 2021)

- Testing and changing the strategies based on insights from rapid-cycle learning (March–September 2021).

B.   Collaborating to improve service delivery

The Stars and TeamWorks initiatives started with a common concern about how COVID-19 made it harder to reach and help families through virtual services. Because the pandemic shifted families' priorities, many had a lot going on, so staff members could not always engage them like they could before the pandemic. As the Stars and TeamWorks implementation teams dug into this opportunity with the research team, the root causes became clear.

In the early phase of the project, the Stars implementation team identified a need for better communication and coordination among Stars staff. Although this was a need before the pandemic, it became stronger when services moved to virtual platforms. After COVID-19 emerged, Stars Connectors—the frontline staff working with families—needed to change how they reached and supported students. In the past, when student attendance was lagging and students needed motivation, Connectors could find and talk with them directly in school. After virtual learning started, Connectors needed to talk with parents first, before reaching the students. For parents with multiple children, this change meant sometimes receiving contacts from multiple Connectors.

Like Stars, before COVID-19 emerged, TeamWorks Connectors met with participants in person. After the pandemic hit and Connectors needed to rely on virtual meetings, reaching students became harder, and so did having conversations about setting and monitoring education and employment goals. Families had a lot going on at home. Because of virtual learning and school closures, children were at home. Sometimes, families would also need to manage technology or Internet difficulties, or sudden changes in work schedules. Because of these new ways of living and working, and the physical distance between TeamWorks participants and Connectors, Connectors felt that goal-focused conversations had a less personal feel and that they could improve their relationships with participants. However, after the research team interviewed participants, participants' reports showed they had strong relationships with staff members, but there was room to change the structure of goal-setting conversations. The implementation team decided to focus on how to support virtual goal setting, monitoring, and goal-focused conversations in a way that helped TeamWorks participants feel more engaged and empowered. To address this opportunity, and for Stars to work on its growth area, the initiatives tested and refined the strategies described below.

> **Common terms**
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> **Connectors:** Agape's frontline staff who work directly with families
>
> **Implementation team:** A group of four or five staff from Stars and TeamWorks who helped the research team develop and test strategies and understand how they worked
>
> **LI² (Learn, Innovate, Improve):** A specific framework for rapid-cycle learning and managing change and program improvement
>
> **Rapid-cycle learning:** An approach for quickly testing solutions to programmatic challenges and opportunity areas
>
> **Work group:** A group of Stars and TeamWorks staff, participants, and community partners who helped the research team understand the program's opportunity areas
>
> **2Gen:** An approach to helping families and improving well-being by working with children and parents together

1. Stars: Improving staff members' coordination and communication

The research team worked with Stars to pilot case coordination meetings designed to promote communication and collaboration among Stars staff members. These 90-minute meetings served as dedicated spaces for Connectors to share challenges with contacting parents or students, come up with potential solutions for these challenges as a peer group, and streamline contact and services for families who worked with multiple Stars Connectors. After two rounds of testing in April and May 2021, Stars staff members shared that the meetings were structured well, felt useful, promoted fruitful discussion, and left them with specific suggestions for improving services.

The Stars team was interested in exploring how Stars could partner with the Family Connector initiative more, which focuses on wraparound services. Connectors described feeling unable to effectively support

families, whose needs for basic services were heightened during the pandemic. The Stars team believed that improved coordination with Family Connectors could address this challenge and strengthen Agape's 2Gen model. In August 2021, Stars and Family Connector staff members participated in a brainstorming session to discuss strategies for better coordination. They suggested that sharing data and clearly defining what coordination looks like could help both initiatives coordinate.

2.   TeamWorks: Testing a structured goal-setting approach

To address the challenge of facilitating virtual goal-setting meetings, TeamWorks tested an adapted version of Stepping Stones to Success, a goal-setting tool from Mathematica's evidence-informed Goal4 It! curriculum (Derr and McCay 2018). Stepping Stones is designed to empower program participants by helping them set motivating, achievable, and time-bound goals. The tool aimed to help Connectors shift their approach to identifying individuals' needs, moving from assessing program participants to facilitating participant-driven conversations about goals and needs. Connectors tested the adapted Stepping Stones tool in April and May 2021 and reported that it helped participants break down high-level goals and name steps that participants needed to take to achieve those goals. Participants reported that Stepping Stones helped them take charge of goal-focused conversations. However, similar to Stars, TeamWorks Connectors said the tool prompted conversations about needs outside the initiative's scope, showing room for greater coordination with other 2Gen initiatives.

TeamWorks tested additional goal setting and monitoring tools in July and August 2021 to support more structured use of Stepping Stones, including structured agendas for goal-setting conversations, a template for goal planning, and a worksheet to identify barriers to meeting goals and relevant strategies. Connectors shared that these tools enhanced goal setting and highlighted opportunities for greater coordination in 2Gen.

C. Lessons learned: Using evidence to support equitable change and strengthen two-generation initiatives

Our work with Stars and TeamWorks revealed opportunities for Agape and two-generation partners to use equity-based principles to lead rapid-cycle learning and strengthen two-generation approaches. These principles include working to understand root causes of program challenges or opportunities that affected populations face; partnering with affected populations to understand root causes, develop solutions, and guide how solutions are tested; and adapting or tailoring solutions in order to meet the unique needs of affected populations and understand what works, for whom, and in what contexts.

1.   Using rapid-cycle learning to promote equitable change

- **Emerging opportunity areas can reflect organizational challenges that always existed.** For many organizations, the pandemic was a push to resolve or improve processes that were not working. Through our partnership with Agape, we learned that the identified growth areas—including improved coordination and assessment of families' needs—reflected challenges that existed before the pandemic started. For example, before COVID-19, inconsistent coordination between Stars Connectors and staff from other 2Gen initiatives might have limited the change or progress staff could have helped families make. The pandemic showed that coordination and collaboration were essential because of families' heightened needs.

- **Engaging 2Gen staff and participants can reveal root causes and potential strategies to address them.** Involving frontline staff and participants in program change can provide perspectives and expertise from those closest to the work. REVISE 2G's work group included Stars and TeamWorks staff members, participants, and community partners, who helped identify program opportunities at the beginning of the project. The research team then worked with dedicated implementation teams of staff to test and refine strategies for these growth areas. Gaining insights from frontline staff and participants was helpful for pushing past initial reactions about how to address program opportunities. For example, TeamWorks staff initially wanted to focus on building and sustaining strong relationships and trust in a virtual space. However, interviews with participants showed that they already felt supported during the pandemic. One participant said that targeted goal setting helped her stay engaged and motivated in her work with her Connector. This comment led staff to share that goal setting had become more challenging virtually, so the team shifted its focus to improve goal-focused conversations.

- **On-the-ground champions are essential to the success of rapid-cycle learning.** Program staff need to believe that change is meaningful and important for them and the families they support, and they need to be clear about how change is happening. Engaging them and lifting up their voices is one strategy to achieve this, but they should also play an active role managing, leading, and monitoring change. The partnership with the implementation teams helped staff move day-to-day tasks forward and share critical insights about how testing and change were going on the ground. These on-the-ground champions made sure that rapid-cycle learning happened smoothly, was grounded in expertise about 2Gen, and continued regardless of staff members' competing priorities and turnover.

2. Strengthening two-generation approaches to meet families' needs

- **Rapid-cycle learning is an inclusive method for supporting two-generation change efforts.** Rapid-cycle learning allows programs to test change strategies in a low-burden, small-scale way, and it emphasizes co-creating strategies with key partners, including program staff and participants. However, organizations like Agape should be mindful of managing potential tensions between staff members' limited bandwidth and meaningful levels of co-creation. Through REVISE 2G, when tailoring and refining the Stepping Stones tool, the research team primarily engaged the TeamWorks implementation team in order to avoid burdening other staff. Although they had a lot going on, some Connectors reported wanting to be more involved in the research processes. When leading their own change efforts, organizations should plan for staff members' collaboration, an approach that can help manage their workloads.

- **Enhancing coordination across two-generation initiatives can help meet families' needs.** Coordination across programs and departments requires intentional planning and ongoing monitoring. For initiatives that support children, adults, and whole families, such coordination is important for making sure staff members streamline services while meeting participants' needs. For example, an organization like Agape can consider promoting coordination by (1) testing tools and strategies, such as Stepping Stones, in other two-generation initiatives; (2) considering how to share data across initiatives and strengthen data on children, parents, and families collected within initiatives; and (3) working with partners to brainstorm and test rapid-cycle learning strategies that can enhance the two-generation approach.

D. Next steps for the partnership and the field

The partnership among Agape, Casey, and Mathematica is continuing with capacity building focused on rapid-cycle learning and two-generation program improvements that are equitable. As Agape continues its long-standing relationship with the Tennessee Department of Human Services to advance 2Gen and coordination with Memphis partners, upcoming dissemination and technical assistance will strengthen staff members' capacity to be learning and thought partners to fellow human services agencies and lead equitable change without external support. Staff will be able to move beyond the research-practice partnership that drove rapid-cycle learning in REVISE 2G, using tools they gain to independently design, implement, and refine their own learning cycles. For other two-generation organizations and philanthropic and research partners, dissemination will provide key lessons, considerations, and strategies for rapid-cycle learning that uplifts partnerships and equity principles.

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