

Toward a Theory of Change for the Build Initiative: A Discussion Paper

November 2004 Version by Charles Bruner (based on materials from and discussion with Barbara Gebhard, Susan Hibbard, Andrea Camp, Deb Stahl, Elyse Rosenblum, Julia Coffman, Richard Chase, and Teresa Hawley and comments from the National Build Conference and the Build Initiative Funders' Advisory Council)

This paper is an effort to organize much of the conceptual work at both the state site and national level that has undergirded the development of Build strategies. It seeks to put this conceptual work into a more explicit and measurable theory of change framework and is designed to stimulate discussion. It was used at the September 2004 Build national meeting as the starting point for a variety of discussions, was a topic of discussion at the September 2004 Build Initiative Funders' Council, and has been revised to incorporate comments at these meetings.

The Build Initiative is a multi-state and multi-foundation effort focusing upon young children and their development. The mission of the Build Initiative is to:

help participating states build a coordinated system of programs, policies, and services (early learning system) that is responsive to the needs of families, careful in the use of private and public resources, and effective in preparing our youngest children for a successful future (school readiness).

The initiative is working with nine states to build these early learning systems, providing both financial support and technical assistance to a group of state and community early childhood leaders, including those from the public sector and the private advocacy and foundation community.

This represents a complex undertaking. Tracking progress, identifying important next steps, and assessing what is working and what is not represent challenges – within individual Build states and by the national Build technical assistance and evaluation team.

Theory-based evaluation strategies have been developed as a way to test and explain complex change processes, particularly around social programs and policies. Theories of change seek to make explicit the set of usually interlocking assumptions upon which those change processes are based. By clearly defining these assumptions, it is possible to better assess their individual and collective validity and power. In short, developing a theory of change is akin to developing an overall road map for change.

Within Build, there are at least three distinct "theories of change" that are emerging. The first deals with the identification of the core components of an early learning system necessary to achieve the goal of school readiness – what a system would need to look like to produce desired change. The second deals with the planning, mobilization, and action strategies to develop that learning system – what political leadership, public support, knowledge, programmatic and infrastructural base, and financing is needed to establish and advance the system building. The third deals with the role of Build resources in serving as a catalyst for constructing that early learning system – how strategic investments (both financial and technical) from the outside can help states move forward this system building. All are interconnected, but speak to different aspects of system building [see below for an analogy].

Three Early Learning Systems Theories of Change -- An Analogy

The three theories of change described here are interconnected and need to align with one another. An analogy that seems apt is that of a complex building project, such as the renovation and expansion of a historic district in a community that has vacant lots and many buildings in need of restoration.

In this analogy, the first theory of change is the overall construction and renovation plan, together with the blueprints for each of the buildings, the mixed usage that is envisioned, and the overall landscaping. This includes connections with the city's electrical grid, water and sewage lines, and transportation system (e.g. a system of systems). This shows what it will look like when fully built. It is likely to undergo changes along the way, but provides the master plan. It involves contouring to the geographic terrain and the historical features, not taking a stock plan used in another location off the shelf.

The second theory of change involves those who will be designing, promoting, developing, and building the system. It involves getting financing for different aspects of the project, and it involves ensuring that the users and inhabitants of the district like and support what will be built. It requires developers, architects, and a whole array of construction crews -- and they must be organized in some way that it all comes together. Wiring needs to occur prior to finishing the dry wall; and some parts of the overall district will be possible to develop before others. It involves a wide range of people, with different skills. All should have an overall sense of the project, but different people need to have much more detail about different aspects. Some must pay specific attention to sequencing and coordinating their work with others. The overall master plan helps maintain overall alignment, but at different stages, the district will look very different from either its original state or the finished project. Still, despite the complexity of the tasks, the historic district renaissance does become reality.

The third theory of change involves state-of-the-art tools or resources that might be provided from outside to overcome specific barriers or accelerate or improve the process. This could include special dispensations from government to treat the historic district in a unique way and raise visibility and financing sources. It could include special equipment that had recently been developed in another country to address an identified radon concern on a district-wide basis and consultation in developing it for the district. Outside help can make the overall result more complete than it otherwise would be.

Theory of Change One -- Core Components of an Early Learning System

Before one can build an early learning system, one has to define what an early learning system is and what it is designed to achieve. The first theory of change describes the assumptions behind focusing upon the early learning system development as a key to child development and success and delineates what needs to be in that system.

1. This theory is based upon an overall assumption that building an early learning system requires public action and will not be fully developed through private actions and the marketplace. The system itself includes programs and strategies that ensure that young children's developmental needs are addressed, which include health and nutrition, parenting, supervision, and guidance and nurturing needs.¹ While the private sector can contribute in various ways to supporting that system, Build's assumption is that the public sector will have to finance and oversee much of the system building and maintenance.

In fact, there is substantial evidence that private actions and the marketplace are unlikely to produce this system, particularly at a level sufficient to meet the needs of children from more vulnerable families. Simple economics show that the costs for ensuring the quality of early childhood care and education services cannot be born by a large proportion of families with young children, and particularly the poorest of those families, where the needs and risks are greatest. Similarly, it is unlikely that the benefits from constructing the system are sufficient to induce the private sector (such as business) to subsidize such services, except at the margins. If an early learning system is to develop, the public sector has to play a major role, much like the public education system. Whether this public sector support ultimately comes from additional state, federal, or community funding (or a combination of the three), the emphasis in Build is to focus at the state level. There is some justification for this locus of activity: states are the laboratories for change, even if financing for some of that change ultimately occurs at the federal level (see Theory of Change Three).

2. At the core of this theory of change is a second assumption that there are a significant number of children who are not being prepared for a successful future who could be helped to succeed if an early learning system were developed.

There is substantial empirical support for the first part of this assumption – that a substantial number of children start school significantly behind their peers and that their future is jeopardized as a result. There also is substantial empirical evidence that family socio-economic status, stimulation and early learning opportunities, and good health

¹ The components of this system to meet these needs – health and nutrition, family support, early intervention, early care and education, and pre-school – are described in a governance paper jointly developed by the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network (SECPTAN) and Build. Each state has developed its own specific description of the components of an early learning system, with built-in assumptions regarding the contribution of each component to achieving school readiness. See: Bruner, C., with Stover Wright, M., Gebhard, B., & Hibbard, S., (2004). Building an early learning system: ABCs of planning and governance structures. Des Moines, IA: State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network and the Build Initiative.

and nutrition all are associated with early learning. This, however, is not sufficient on its own to conclude either that children not currently being prepared can be helped or that an early learning system is the best way to help them.

The second part of this assumption is that there are programs and policies that can positively impact these conditions and that can reach the children and families who need and can benefit from them. Currently, there are a number of evidenced-based programs that, as individual programs, have shown their ability to improve the development of the young children they have served. Many of these have been targeted to low income children, those most vulnerable to starting school behind. Research also has shown that high quality programs benefit all children, although the gains (particularly in terms of reducing future social costs) appear to be greatest for low income and otherwise vulnerable children. In short, exemplary programs have shown success in improving both child development and strengthening families, although they generally have not moved poor families out of poverty.

At the same time, there is only limited current evidence that such programs and services can be developed and brought to scale and can succeed in positively impacting most or all of their target populations. While demonstration programs may be successful, they usually do not successfully enroll all the children they seek to benefit and generally have some attrition among those they do initially reach. There have been few efforts to bring exemplary programs to scale to test whether they can be expanded to that level and retain the quality and intensity that made them effective as individual programs.² This applies to building an early care and education system and creating the quality, education, and dedication of the workforce that would be needed in those caregiving and educational roles. It also applies to creating effective outreach strategies to reach those with the most to gain from receiving services but also the most suspicious, isolated, or resistant to participation. While much has been made of the importance of prenatal care to healthy growth and development, for instance, there has been limited success in developing effective outreach strategies to reach and engage pregnant women who, for non-medical reasons, are most vulnerable to poor birth outcomes.

This discussion does not mean that the assumption is faulty, however, but merely that it has not yet been fully tested. In fact, one of the values of identifying such assumptions is to point to areas where there are particular benefits to testing and learning from new approaches. The reason for developing a theory of change is to test and refine that theory and its assumptions, as new information comes to light.

² Research on demonstration programs can provide evidence of program *efficacy*, but demonstration programs generally are developed and implemented by persons dedicated and committed to success, under “ideal” conditions. Broader-scale implementation likely will not have the same level of staff expertise and commitment. Program *effectiveness* relates to how the program operates under real-world conditions and broad-based diffusion. Making the distinction between *efficacy* and *effectiveness* is particularly important in examining human service programs, as so much ultimately rests on relationship development and interpersonal behavior, not treatment protocol or curriculum.

3. A third assumption within this theory is that developing an early learning system, rather than simply expanding an array of program options, is a key to achieving success.

The term “system” means more than a set of independently operating programs and services. For early learning, it implies an effective and seamless set of referrals and follow-ups across health, nutrition, socio-emotional development, family support, early care and education, early intervention, and preschool services. It also implies referrals and follow-ups to child welfare, housing, and adult and child mental health and substance abuse services, when children and their families have needs in any of these areas that otherwise would jeopardize early learning. It implies alignment in the approaches different elements of the system take in supporting young children’s development, and avoidance of duplication of services or conflicts in service goals. Under this assumption, there is more to achieving school readiness and success than creating a series of discrete, effective programs and services. These programs and services must coordinate and connect with one another to meet their goals.

There is substantial evidence, in most states, that the current array of programs and services for young children and their families does not operate as a system. Referrals from one program to another are sporadic and often ineffective. Some services and supports are available only in some places and not others. There is substantial fragmentation, and parents often experience frustration and difficulty navigating the array of services that are available to them and their children.

There also is evidence that different elements of an early learning system interact and reinforce one another. A child with an untreated dental or hearing problem will not benefit from even an exemplary preschool program. A program that strengthens parenting in the home also makes parents better consumers of early childhood services and advocates for their children in the schools.

While there also is strong logic behind this assumption of the need for a coordinated system, it also is plausible that the primary shortcoming is not the absence of coordination across services but the lack of sufficient services in the first place. If the services existed, families might be able to navigate them sufficiently well to achieve much better results than exist today. Focusing upon service coordination or integration in the absence of quality, affordable, and available services may be putting the cart well before the horse.

In addition, there is very limited evidence in the field that service coordination, let alone integration, is easily achievable, particularly across the array of federal categorical programs and funding streams. Again, this is part of the learning agenda to which Build can contribute. Clearly, better connecting poor quality services is likely to do little to improve children’s well-being. Insufficient and poor quality services may be a greater barrier to getting children the help they need than the lack of connections across those services.

In short, the theory of change regarding the “what” of an early learning system includes the following assumptions that will be tested as Build evolves:

- The system itself must include health and nutrition, socio-emotional development, family support, early intervention, child care, and preschool to fully realize its goals.
- The system requires public action, resources, and oversight.
- There are a set of effective services and strategies that can be effectively implemented to reach those who need and can benefit from them.
- These need to and can be coordinated and aligned in order to achieve their goals.

While it would be simpler to regard these as already confirmed facts and bases for action, the discussion has sought to show that they remain assumptions that need to be subject to continuous examination.

In addition, it is important to recognize alternative theories that can be posed as better (more efficient or effective) at producing the desired results for children. Other theories of change, each of which has its own adherents, include cultural, more strictly economic, and different developmental age theories.

Cultural theories suggest that society, and particularly subcultures within that society, do not place value on nurturing and raising young children. Parents put their own lives and careers ahead of the development of their young children. Subcultures, particularly those found in impoverished neighborhoods, place their young children in front of televisions and do not read, talk, or interact with them in ways that stimulate growth and development. Society does not provide the incentives, supports, and opportunities for parents and the community to provide a more enriched environment for young children. Under this theory, parents need to make different choices, and cultural norms need to change to support those choices. Under such cultural theories, improving services may not be seen as having any role, and can even be seen as part of the problem.

More strictly economic theories suggest that poverty and economic stress make it difficult for young children to get the basic health and nutrition they need and for their parents to provide the other supports and enrichment activities that stimulate their learning. Parents would choose higher quality child care, spend more time with their children, advance themselves educationally and culturally, and provide overall enhanced nurturing environments if they did not need to spend so much of their time struggling to get by. Even if a strong early learning system were developed, poor families and their children would have difficulty making use of it. The best way to improve child development is to reduce poverty – through employment programs, income transfer programs, and housing and other subsidy efforts as core strategies.

A variant of this economic theory applies specifically to poor and disinvested neighborhoods, where young children are particularly vulnerable to starting and staying behind in school. In these neighborhoods, economic development strategies must be developed that go beyond the individual family to creating new overall neighborhood

conditions. Poor and disinvested neighborhoods, because of their endemic poverty and lack of hope, also are subject to violence and crime and other social ills that make growing up hazardous. Community building efforts are needed that create greater hope and opportunity for all residents, or individual economic efforts, let alone child-focused educational ones, will have only limited success. While some individual families, often with Herculean efforts, may succeed through individually-directed actions, they still will be at risk if they stay in the neighborhood and will make the neighborhood even more disinvested if they leave. Community development and organization and mobilization actions, rather than child-specific programs, are needed to create the opportunities that will enable children to succeed.

Still other theories may take issue with the primacy of the early years to child success and contend that a focus upon a different developmental stage is needed. The Education Trust, for instance, argues that schools have the primary role in improving student achievement and closing the achievement gap. Regardless of where students start school, the Trust contends that schools can produce high rates of overall achievement, long term. Alternatively, schools that do not have qualified staff nor hold students to high standards will produce poor educational results, regardless of what occurred prior to school entry.

All these different theories of change may have some validity, in certain circumstances and with certain young children and their families. Theories of change related to complex social situations are not likely to be either absolutely true or definitively false. Instead, they are likely to apply and explain conditions or results, such as school readiness, better or worse depending upon a variety of factors. Again, spelling out the assumptions behind a theory of change is important to discerning the conditions under which they apply and to determining areas where learning and knowledge building is needed. As Build evolves, it may find that it needs to incorporate some elements of these other theories into its own theory. Alternatively, it may have to demonstrate that its theory is more relevant than other theories in order to secure needed support.

Theory of Change Two -- Core Components of Early Learning System Building

Defining the nature of an early learning system that can better achieve school readiness establishes the ultimate goal for system building, but it does not describe how that system will be built and what strategies are required to build it.

While there frequently is much discussion and elaboration on what needs to be part of an early learning system (Theory of Change One), the theory of change for system building often is not well articulated. This theory ultimately is about the elements needed to produce systems change in a political environment. The following are a set of assumptions that generally are incorporated into Build's system building overall theory of change:

1. Leadership is needed at multiple levels, with the Governor's support a key to making major policy and financing changes, coupled with legislative alignment that supports

those changes. Generally, the enumeration of lessons learned from comprehensive community change initiatives includes a statement regarding the importance of leadership in achieving change. Building an early learning system ultimately involves work across agencies and existing organizational structures, with some leadership for change within each of these organizations, all answerable to the Governor. As chief executive officer, the support of the Governor often is seen as a key to success, both to keep the system building agenda on the front burner and to use executive authority to troubleshoot to make sure that obstacles that inevitably emerge in cross-agency work are overcome and not treated as reasons for going no further. At the same time, legislatures can block gubernatorial actions and proposals, and they also can influence gubernatorial actions. In most states, major policy and financing changes not only require gubernatorial leadership, but require legislative support as well.

Gubernatorial and other public sector key leadership, including legislative leadership, however, can either be viewed as a factor over which an initiative has little control or as an element that must be developed if it does not currently exist. If gubernatorial leadership does not currently exist, due to lack of gubernatorial interest or in some cases lack of gubernatorial power within the state, or there is no corresponding legislative alignment, advocacy and leadership, particularly from outside government, may be able to create it. At the gubernatorial level, lack of interest can sometimes be addressed through education and/or pressure on the current Governor. Sometimes it may need to be addressed through the gubernatorial electoral process, where early learning system building issues are addressed by gubernatorial candidates as part of their charge from the electorate.

2. There must be strong recognition of the gaps in the current system (or non-system) and the consequences of those gaps on child outcomes in order to produce change. Good data is necessary both to show these gaps and failings and to track progress toward correcting them. "Awareness is a precursor to change," and it is important to recognize both the nature and the magnitude of the issues that need to be addressed.

In fact, the School Readiness Indicators Initiative, funded by the Ford, Kauffman, and Packard Foundations, has focused upon developing a set of widely shared indicators within state government regarding school readiness to serve as a major catalyst for policy action. Working with seventeen states, the initiative has seen this as a keystone to creating an early learning system. In part, adoption of this approach was based upon evidence of increasing emphasis within state governments on outcomes or results accountability as a way to drive policy and determine funding decisions. At the same time, the recognition of the failings of the current system does not in itself necessarily result in action to enhance or build a new system, particularly in tight budgetary times. Further, actions may be taken because of a general belief that gaps and problems exist, even without measurement and tracking systems that quantify them.

3. A broadly shared overall vision for the early learning system is needed to ensure that there is alignment and collaboration in system development, and attention is not deflected or side-stepped to narrow or tangential agendas. It is common for cross-

system groups, task forces, and other planning bodies to take on the establishment of a shared vision as one of their first tasks. This can be part of the process for gaining a group identity and the trust and understanding necessary for moving forward as a group, although it is common for these vision statements to be of a very general nature. An additional qualifier to this assumption, implied by the second half of the statement, is that this vision must be sufficiently concrete in describing the early learning system that it does not produce ambiguity and different interpretations by different members.

4. Actions can be taken on elements of system building as opportunities arise, and early wins are important for maintaining momentum. Although these actions do not necessarily have to be sequenced, they should not work at cross-purposes but must keep momentum toward overall system building alive. This assumption recognizes that, within political systems, it is not always possible to control the overall agenda or timing for actions, and it is important to be opportunistic in taking actions when they present themselves. It further is based upon a belief that opportunities will arise and can be instrumental in moving forward a system building agenda, provided the actions represent part of the overall system building. At the same time, however, there is some danger that a discrete, small-scale action taken may be marketed as "the solution" to a much larger concern. Further, once policymakers have enacted something as a solution, they tend to move on to other issues. Policymakers who have marketed an action they took as a solution may be resistant to re-examining that issue, as that would imply some failure in their initial approach.

5. Capacity and expertise must be developed to effectively implement system building activities; for reasons of credibility and to avoid costly missteps. Doing so involves engaging mid-level managers within state systems and professional development systems throughout the organization. While it is not always possible to time all actions, it is important to be prepared to implement, when the time arises. Planning often can proceed even before it is clear that policy actions will be taken to put plans into place. This justifies planning activities, particularly those involving mid-level agency personnel, sometimes with outside advocacy or provider groups. The assumption is that this both can help ensure effective implementation, when resources are made available, and can build support and understanding for reforms and a political base for action. If policies are developed without the capacity to effectively implement them or without buy-in of mid-level managers in agencies charged with carrying them out, the effectiveness of policies will be seriously jeopardized.

Clearly, the organizational change literature indicates the danger of seeking to make change solely from the top. At the same time, some of the most significant and broad-based changes that have occurred (such as the initial development of Head Start within the War on Poverty) actually occurred at a time when the change was novel and the administrative capacity had yet to be built. Opportunity is not always directly aligned with immediate implementation capacity.

6. Public awareness and broad support are needed both to initiate and sustain system building. The public also plays a role in this process, and the more that early learning

system building is seen as an issue of broad public concern, the more likely it is to receive policy attention. Under this assumption, gaining public awareness and grassroots support represents an important element of a system building agenda. Further, framing early childhood in ways that resonate with the public also is seen as essential to gaining sufficiently broad public buy-in to move agendas forward. In particular, this is necessary to ensure that alternative or opposing forces do not emerge.

7. Gaining sufficient political support extends beyond public awareness and requires political mobilization and advocacy, with leadership and advocacy from outside government. Achieving the type of significant change and investment necessary to build an early learning system requires concerted action and pressure. The interest group nature of the political system means that pressure groups must be mobilized to support change. This includes but goes beyond gubernatorial leadership and involves the legislative process and lobbying power. A related assumption behind much early learning system building efforts is that mobilizing different political spheres of influence – from the business community, the faith community, the law enforcement community, etc. – is critical to achieving success. This assumption is based upon the perception that lobbying through the traditional child advocacy and early childhood caregiving community has been ineffective in producing significant action and the experiences in some states of corporate leaders serving as effective champions for early learning system building.

8. Alignment of all (or most) of the above creates the necessary nexus for the major leaps forward needed to build a system (as opposed to taking the individual, incremental steps as in #4). It is not likely to be a single factor, but rather an alignment of a number of factors, that results in major steps forward in system building. In fact, the history in states has been that, while there are often periodic, incremental advancements to support early learning, most of the advancements are made through major new initiatives or emphases that become major legislative agendas for a particular session. In most states, there are at most one or two major policy thrusts in a given year. System building requires such a major policy thrust, where there is continuous attention and pressure directed toward action. This is only likely to occur when most of the above elements have been developed and put into place. Evidence from state system building efforts generally suggests that, while actual implementation may occur over a period of years, the establishment of the policy and the commitment to invest is likely to be concentrated within a much shorter time frame, where energies of many have to be focused. In fact, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Casey Strategic Consulting Group's work is based specifically on the assumption that there are particular moments of opportunity in states (often born by crises), where fundamental policy change is most achievable.

As with the first theory of change, there also exist alternatives to this theory and to each of its assumptions. One alternative theory is that truly building an early learning system requires federal policy and, in fact, cannot be achieved through state policy. While states may be laboratories of democracy, they will only be able to get part way to developing an early learning system. As federal funding currently amounts to most of

the public spending on early learning, greater federal financing is necessary to truly build that system. In addition, given the disparity across states in economic capacity and the status of their young children, only through federal financing and leadership can the same learning opportunities be made available to all children. Therefore, the focus should be on federal, as opposed to state, policy.

Theory of Change Three -- Build's Catalytic Role in Supporting States in Systems Building

Clearly, the amount of funding provided by Build to states, while quite substantial compared with other planning and mobilization resources available to them, is small in comparison to the current resources states are spending on early learning. It is very small in relation to the additional investments needed to build the early learning systems the states are envisioning. The theory of change behind Build's own investments relates to the role that investments in the hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to states can play in leveraging public investments to build early learning systems in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Build's own theory of change regarding its role in systems building also is based on a set of testable assumptions:

1. There are identifiable states with sufficient "readiness," as measured by advancement and alignment on a significant portion of the elements described in the assumptions in the theory of change regarding system building (Theory of Change Two), that will be able to move forward dramatically with relatively modest outside support. In some states, early learning represents "an agenda waiting to happen." Much like quantum mechanics, when energy has been stored up, a seemingly small additional amount can unleash major action (the straw that broke the camel's back). Under this assumption, one of Build's major roles has been to identify those actual states most ready to move forward, ones where Build's resources are most likely to represent that inertia-breaking final investment. Alternatively, there are other states where there may not be full alignment but there is enough energy and action to move forward on important aspects of an agenda, particularly ones where there can be substantial new learning. In these instances, Build's investment can contribute to advances and to developing lessons learned for other states, which more than justifies the overall investment.
2. A team of committed leaders, from both inside and outside government, can serve as a driving force for this system building. There obviously is much resonance to Margaret Mead's observation regarding change, as it is so frequently quoted, "Never doubt that a few committed individuals can change the world; indeed, that is the only thing that ever has." In fact, Build's teams have been fashioned with that in mind, generally bringing together those within each state who are most passionate about early learning. The assumption is that Build can play a unique and catalytic role simply in creating the space and opportunity for this team to work together.

3. The teams, once assembled, can make effective use of technical assistance, state peer-to-peer learning and support, and access to flexible funds. They can help fill critical gaps or produce critical new pressures to create the alignment and support necessary to build that early learning system. This assumption does not pose a specific structure within a state to plan and govern early learning system building, but relies upon these teams and their leaders to construct the necessary programmatic and mobilization elements incorporated into the first and second theories of change. In addition, cross-site exchanges and learning and support will produce greater gains than if states work separately. The learning community can offer practical peer support and assistance that is at least as valuable as other forms of help.

4. Feedback is essential to continuous improvement and development. The incorporation of a state evaluation partner, as well as a national evaluation structure, will facilitate learning and continuous improvement. Build has made a significant investment in evaluation, with a particular emphasis upon a state evaluation partner who participates in the state Build process and can provide evaluation advice and technical assistance. This interactive evaluation approach is based upon the assumption that states will learn by doing, but will be more able to benefit from their experiences if they have evaluation expertise within their team.

5. The Build imprimatur can provide additional credibility within states for this work, and nationally Build can serve as an effective voice, particularly where federal policy is concerned. In politics, "perception often is reality," and, under this assumption, designation as a Build state can provide an additional legitimacy and credibility to the work of the team. The aggregation of funders supporting Build also has sufficient national standing to help bring federal issues to policy consideration.

6. Even if a fully-realized early learning system is not established within any of the Build states, there will be sufficient advancements and lessons learned to make the Build investment worthwhile. The Build Initiative is seeking to chart new territory, as no state has the type of early learning system that Build itself would say represents even a core public system of support in this area. Bringing together leading thinkers and doers within the most ready or particularly active states and providing them resources will foster innovations. Their learnings will help further identify what will be necessary to eventually build those systems. In this assumption, Build essentially takes the role of investing in innovation, as described in the Rensselaerville Institute's *Outcome Funding*.

7. At some point, there is a "tipping point" where actions will accelerate and be sustainable, without ongoing and additional outside support – the current type of external foundation funding will no longer be required. The support provided through Build helps move toward that as yet uncharted "tipping point" area. As Build moves closer to that point, new and different opportunities are likely to emerge, and the respective roles of federal, state, community, and the private sector in system building and sustainability will become clearer. If, after a period of investment, there is no evidence of a tipping point, however, there is reason to conclude that the current approach to early learning system building needs to be ended and new approaches

need to be explored. In either event, there is a time limitation to the current type of outside, foundation investments being made in Build, as a catalyst to leveraging public action.

Conclusion

In many respects, the term "theories of change" has helped to legitimize praxis as an approach to social change. It involves being more explicit about the "notions" or "hunches" (e.g. "theories") upon which actions are being based and more supportive of adapting and modifying strategies in the light of experience. It raises the "so what" question and, by doing so, helps to sort out when actions are or are not contributing to meeting overall goals and which actions being posed are more, or less, essential to moving forward.

Often, collaborative groups select actions to take because they represent a path of least resistance (e.g. no one objects that it is a bad thing to do), rather than focusing upon what truly is needed to achieve their vision. Articulating a "theory of change" makes it more possible to raise the "so what" questions and make the work most productive. It also makes it more possible to learn from experiences and mistakes, and to share them with others. People and processes often learn most from their mistakes and from recognizing where their actions did not fit their underlying assumptions or their underlying assumptions need to be changed. The theories of change presented here are designed to enable that type of learning and continuous improvement.

While there are many assumptions within the three theories that are likely to require modification, based upon experience, there also is a strong basis for making these assumptions. The lack of full answers should not be a cause for inaction, but rather a call for further work. Clearly, there is a lot that is known, more than enough to take significant actions in system building. The theories of change outlined here can help to ensure that, in taking those significant actions, learning and continuous improvement – e.g. refinement of both theory and action – occur.