

Strong Minds Network of Palm Beach County

A Five - Year Evaluation Report (9/2020)



Executive Summary

1 INTRODUCTION

This evaluation report provides an in-depth review and analysis of the overall work and outcomes from the Strong Minds Network (SM) implemented from 2015 to 2019. SM is Palm Beach County's (PBC) Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The purpose of a QRIS is to support early care and education programs to improve program quality with the ultimate goal of preparing children for school. SM was launched in January of 2015. It is a redesign from the previous version of the QRIS in PBC named Quality Counts (QC).



SM is an integral part of Children's Services Council (CSC) of Palm Beach County's Early Childhood System of Care. CSC is an independent special district established by Palm Beach County voters in 1986. CSC provides leadership, funding, services and research on behalf of Palm Beach County's children so they grow up healthy, safe and strong. The early childhood system of care funded by CSC has three major categories of programs serving children and their families: (a) individual child and family services (Healthy Beginnings), (b) quality child care (Scholarships and Quality Care), and (c) neighborhood-based services (BRIDGES). SM is a key strategy in (b) quality child care, which is part of the early childhood system of care.

THE MISSION of SM is to use research and data to increase the quality of early care and education programs through integrated supports and resources offered to the early learning community, children and their families.

THE VISION of SM is that children will have quality early educational experiences that will increase their chances of achieving school success and becoming productive members of society.

SM seeks to improve the lives and learning of young children by improving outcomes in the following areas:

- Child care programs' learning environment for children
- Child care practitioners' quality and practice
- Family engagement
- Child development and kindergarten readiness

SM focuses on resources that support the child care provider's ability to improve the quality of the learning environment and, in particular, the effectiveness of the teacher-child interactions. The leadership of SM believes that intentional program leaders, who take advantage of the array of resources offered, will achieve higher quality standards and provide quality early care and education experiences for the children and families in Palm Beach County. A number of supports and resources are made available to child care programs, leaders, practitioners and families to ensure children receive high-quality care and effective teaching that will ultimately prepare them for kindergarten.

2 EVALUATION FOCUS AND APPROACHES

2.1 SM Evaluation Focus

The following four sets of evaluation questions guided the SM evaluation. With the progression of each year, the evaluation was structured to answer questions related to design, implementation and outcomes. For the fourth- and fifth-year evaluation, there was sufficient data to address the question of Strong Minds' impact on children.

1. How do the stakeholders perceive the design and implementation of SM?
 - How do the stakeholders perceive the design of SM?
 - How do the stakeholders perceive the implementation of SM?
 - What are the characteristics of the child care providers, practitioners, and children participating in SM?
 - What are the other characteristics of SM implementation?
2. What are SM's effect on child care providers and practitioners?
3. What are SM's effect on child outcomes (e.g., school readiness outcomes and GOLD outcomes)?
4. What SM elements (e.g., program quality, teacher-child interactions, and technical assistance) are related to better outcomes for child care providers, practitioners, and children participating in SM?

2.2 SM Evaluation Approaches

PROCESS EVALUATION: Process evaluation was conducted for all five years of the broader project evaluation to identify the extent to which program activities have been implemented. The process evaluation results, mainly for the evaluation questions related to implementation and design, help stakeholders make decisions and programmatic adjustments that can improve the work of the SM Network.

Over the five years, process evaluation was a significant part of the SM evaluation. Building on knowledge gleaned in Years One and Two, in Year Three (2016-17) surveys were conducted with (a) CSC and partner organization leadership and staff and (b) child care program directors, operators, and owners regarding their perceptions on the design and implementation of SM. In Year Four (2017-18) practitioners in SM were surveyed. Process evaluation for all five years included archival data from CSC and partner organizations.

OUTCOME EVALUATION: The outcome evaluation examined SM's achievement of outcomes at the program, practitioner, and child levels. The analysis was conducted using individual programs' and practitioners' first, second, third, and fourth CLASS assessment. The GOLD assessment was used to measure children's growth while in SM, and the STAR Early Literacy was used to assess kindergarten readiness. The outcome evaluation provides evidence on the effectiveness of the network overall, as well as indicates which network elements are more related to outcomes at various levels.

3 EVALUATION FINDINGS

3.1 Quality Design of SM

Practitioners in SM agreed with the design of SM, an indication of the validity of the SM theory of change from the practitioners’ perspective. Results indicated that practitioners strongly valued the importance of all SM supports. The percent of respondents in the survey* who selected “extremely important” were as follows: SEEK Professional Development Scholarships (71.1%), Professional Development (trainings, certifications, college level coursework) (71.0%), ACHIEVE Salary Supplement (67.6%), Career Advising (57.9%), and GOLD Child Assessment (56.9%).

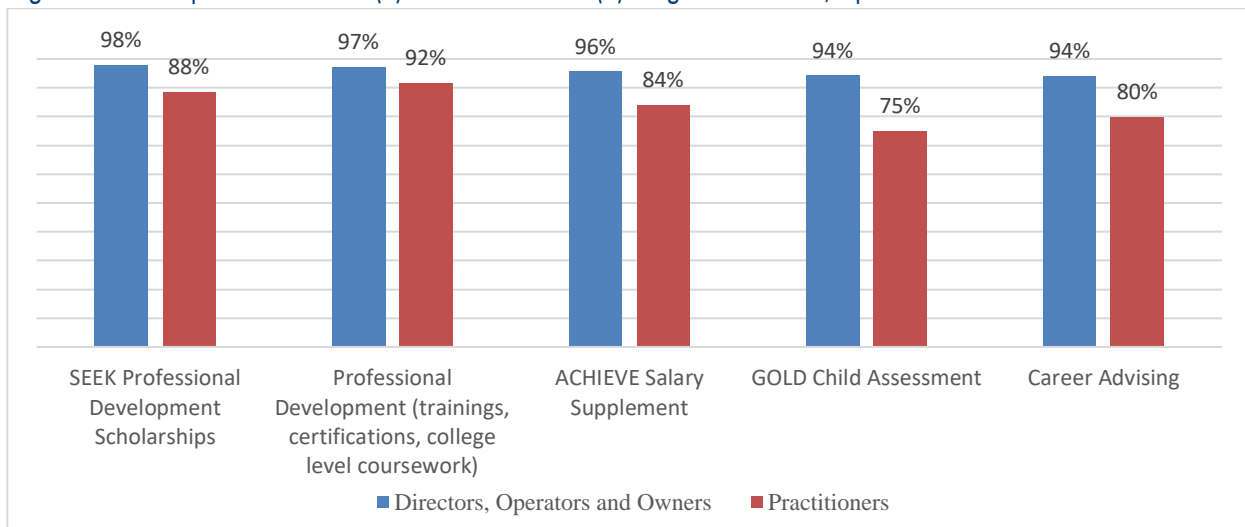
Table 1 - The Importance of SM and the Supports as Perceived by Practitioners (2017-18)

Supports	Extremely Important	Moderately Important	Somewhat Important	Slightly Important	Not Important at All	Not Sure	n
SEEK Professional Development Scholarships	71.1%	17.3%	6.2%	2.3%	0.8%	2.3%	353
Professional Development (trainings, certifications, college level coursework)	71.0%	20.7%	4.4%	1.5%	0.3%	2.1%	338
ACHIEVE Salary Supplement	67.6%	16.3%	5.5%	1.5%	1.7%	7.3%	343
Career Advising	57.9%	22.0%	9.2%	4.2%	0.9%	5.9%	337
GOLD Child Assessment	56.9%	18.1%	11.1%	4.7%	5.2%	4.1%	343

*Note: that Technical Assistance was not included as an option in this section of the survey.

A Comparison between the 2016-17 survey of child care program directors, operators and owners and 2017-18 survey of practitioners in SM. In Figure 1, the responses from the two surveys are compared between (a) directors, operators, and owners of child care programs and (b) practitioners in SM. Results showed that directors, operators, and owners of child care programs had higher ratings on the importance of SM supports than the practitioners. The percentages displayed denote those who chose “extremely important” or “moderately important” for the SM supports.

Figure 1 – A Comparison between (a) Practitioners and (b) Program Directors, Operators and Owners



Note: For directors, operators, and owners, the number of the survey respondents ranges from 135 to 137, depending on items. One person represents a SM program. For practitioners, the number ranges from 337 to 353, depending on items.

3.2 Quality Implementation of SM

SM practitioners reported that SM has been implemented effectively. The table below indicates the mean and standard deviation for the effectiveness of the elements in the SM support system. Among the 15 means, 10 of them were above 3.0 and 5 of them between 2.83 and 2.97. In other words, most of the items were rated between “extremely effective” and “moderately effective”. Particularly, all items under “Training” and “Technical Assistance” were rated above 3.0.

Table 2 - Descriptive Statistics for the Effectiveness of the Elements in SM Support

Factors	Items	Mean	SD
Effectiveness of Career Advising	One-on-One Advising Sessions	3.27	1.04
	Onsite Visits	3.15	1.11
	Phone Advising Sessions	2.97	1.14
	Group Advising Sessions	2.95	1.08
Effectiveness of Training	Continuing Education Classes (Informal Trainings)	3.53	0.80
	College-Level Courses (Formal Trainings)	3.51	0.82
	Online Classes	3.31	0.94
Effectiveness of Technical Assistance	One-on-One Technical Assistance with TA Specialist	3.43	0.93
	Modeling in the Classroom	3.42	0.88
	Observation/Feedback	3.39	0.90
	Reviewing Online Resources	3.32	0.90
Effectiveness of TS GOLD Assessment Tools	GOLD Classroom Reports	3.00	1.28
	GOLD Documentation App	2.92	1.31
	GOLD Lesson Plans	2.87	1.34
	GOLD Family Forms/Reports	2.83	1.34

Note: Although phrased differently, all items were on a 0-4 scale with “0” being “Not effective at all,” “1” “Slightly effective,” “2” “Somewhat effective,” “3” “Moderately effective” and 4 “Extremely effective”.

3.3 Characteristics of Child Care Providers, Practitioners and Children in SM

Table 3 – Number of Participating Programs, Practitioners, and Children in SM

Category	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Program	256	255	222	253	239
Practitioner	2,167	2,172	2,325	2,563	2,132
Children	11,966	12,981	11,677	12,925	12,286

Most of the SM programs were centers, consistently more than 50% of all SM programs, while school-based programs were about 20 % and family child care homes were about 25% over the five-year period. There was a pattern in ratings over the years. (a) Percentages for “Emerging” and “Promising” decreased (14% to 1%), (b) percentages for “In-Network Tier 1” increased (66% to 82%), and (c) the percentage for “In-Network 2” remained about the same (about 18%). Each year about 2,300 practitioners working in the SM programs. About 40% of them are Hispanic/Latino, 35% Black, 18% white, 4% Haitian/Caribbean Islander and 3% others. Regarding the race of the children in SM, about 52% are Black, 33% white and 15% others.

3.4 Positive Effects on Programs and Practitioners

There has been an improvement in program quality.

For the fifth year of evaluation, a total of 94 programs that were active in SM as of Sept. 30, 2019 had the third CLASS Pre-K assessment. The data in the following table indicate that there was a statistically significant improvement in all CLASS Pre-K subscales and composite (CLASS Pre-K mean) with a small to medium effect size.



Table 4 – Improvement between the First, Second, and Third CLASS Pre-K Assessments of Programs

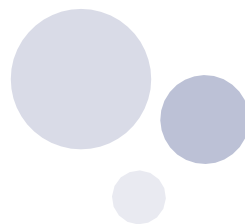
Instrument	1 st Assessment Mean	2 nd Assessment Mean	3 rd Assessment Mean	P Value	Effect Size (Partial Eta Squared)
CLASS Classroom Organization	5.60	5.66	5.94	<.001	.20
CLASS Emotional Support	6.15	6.25	6.28	<.022	.08
CLASS Instructional Support	2.28	2.47	2.85	<.001	.33
CLASS Composite	4.68	4.79	5.02	<.001	.27

There has been an improvement in practitioners' quality.

For the fifth year of evaluation, CLASS assessment scores were linked to the practitioners in the classrooms to further examine the SM impact. A total of 414 practitioners who were active in SM as of Sept. 30, 2019 had the first and second CLASS Pre-K assessments. The data in the following table indicate that there was a statistically significant improvement in all CLASS Pre-K subscales and composite (CLASS Pre-K mean) with a small effect size.

Table 5 – Improvement between the First and Second CLASS Pre-K Assessments of Practitioners

Instrument	1 st Assessment Mean	2 nd Assessment Mean	P Value	Effect Size (Partial Eta Squared)
CLASS Classroom Organization	5.63	5.86	<.001	.08
CLASS Emotional Support	6.20	6.30	<.001	.03
CLASS Instructional Support	2.48	2.76	<.001	.08
CLASS Composite	4.77	4.97	<.001	.09



3.5 Positive Effects on Children

Analyses of the 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20 kindergarteners in The School District of Palm Beach County, with controls for children’s background, indicated SM’s positive effects on children. The following is a summary. The findings of various positive effects on children in the table are correlational rather than causal. Although children’s and programs’ characteristics are controlled in various analyses, theoretically there could be other factors that attribute to the findings.



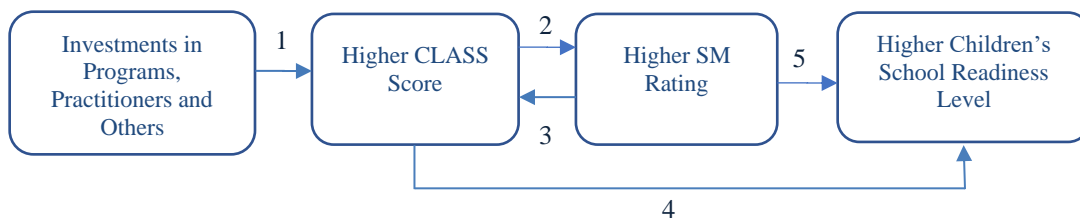
Table 6 - A Summary of the SM’s Positive Effects on Children

Comparison Group	Kindergarten Readiness	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
SM vs. Non-SM	Odds for being kindergarten ready	21% more likely for SM children	38% more likely for SM children	37% more likely for SM children

3.6 The Links in the Logic Model

How did positive effects happen? When linking SM inputs and activities with outcomes for programs, practitioners and children in the data analysis, the data indicated various statistically significant relationships between SM activities and outcomes. Figure 2 is a summary of the evaluation key findings and the significant relationships between SM activities and outcomes that validate SM’s theory of change and logic model. The Schematic presentation demonstrates: (1) Investments in certain core technical assistance areas are associated with higher increase in programs’ CLASS score. (2) By design, programs’ higher CLASS scores lead to higher SM ratings. (3) Higher SM ratings not only predict practitioners’ higher final CLASS scores, but also more growth between the first and final CLASS scores. (4) Programs’ higher CLASS scores are associated with children’s higher school readiness level. (5) Higher SM program ratings are associated with children’s higher school readiness level.

Figure 2 - A Schematic Presentation of Validating SM’s Theory of Change



4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The five-year evaluation results indicate successful implementation of SM from 2014-15 to 2018-19. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the following recommendations are presented.

First, the key elements of SM should be continued. The evaluation findings indicate that SM’s theory of change is valid, and SM has made a significant positive impact on practitioners, programs, and particularly children. The policy context for Florida and CSC continues to change. However, the key elements of SM should be preserved.

Second, there should be continuing emphasis on CLASS. CLASS scores are documented to have a positive association with child outcomes (Blazar, 2015; Burson, 2010; Kane & Staiger, 2012; Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White & Salovey, 2012; Teachstone, 2017). Our own analyses also indicated that CLASS scores at the program level are associated with children’s school readiness level. CLASS scores for the programs, particularly in the subscale of Instructional Support, are relatively low, leaving large room for improvement.



Finally, there is a need to continue to build up the data capacity. The evaluation findings point to the fact that CSC and its partners already have a strong capacity for data warehousing and retrieving. Moving forward, more emphases should be placed on a relational database with a focus on practitioners. With more data on practitioners over the years, we will be able to test the effects on practitioners, and in turn, their impact on the classroom, the program, and children.

Third, there is a need to engage more with parents and collect data on parent engagement. A meta-analysis of empirical studies indicates that parental engagement is important for children’s learning outcomes during early years, including being ready for kindergarten (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan, 2016). SM has a strategy on parent engagement but has not been investing in this area as much as in other areas. Investing more in parental engagement and collecting data on it is likely to strengthen positive outcomes for children.



5 CONCLUSION: SM AS AN EFFECTIVE MODEL

The two most challenging tasks in developing a quality rating and improvement system are to show (a) the validity of the theory of change and (b) the overall efficacy of the system. **The validity of the theory of change** means that (a) the intervention leads to improvement in rating and (b) higher rating is associated with better child outcomes. **The efficacy of the system** means that the system leads to better child outcomes. It has proved challenging for other QRIS to show evidence on both (a) the validity of theory of change and (b) the efficacy of the system. Grunewald and Jahr's (2017) report, titled *"How Wisconsin's child care rating and improvement system measures up,"* does not find any evidence to support Wisconsin Young-Star Rating System's theory of change and efficacy. The report by Tout et al. (2017) also points to the challenge in finding QRIS that has empirical evidence for validity and efficacy.

However, this evaluation report on CSC's SM found strong evidence in support of the theory of change. Specific SM supports are associated with the improvement of the programs, and higher SM program ratings are associated with better child outcomes. **First**, certain supports have positive effects on programs' CLASS scores. **Second**, there has been a continuous improvement from the first, second, third, and fourth assessments at both the individual practitioner level and the program level. **Third**, practitioners' CLASS score increased more over the years in SM sites with higher ratings. **Finally**, children in SM In-Network programs achieved better in kindergarten readiness total scaled score and being kindergarten ready than children in SM non-In-Network programs.



This evaluation report on CSC's SM also found evidence of SM's overall efficacy began to emerge. Children in SM performed better in kindergarten readiness total scaled score and being kindergarten ready than children not in SM. CSC's SM has emerged as an effective model in developing a QRIS. For more information, open the links to [SM Evaluation Full Report](#) and [Technical Report](#).



6 REFERENCES

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