



# CORPORATE REPORT 2017/18



**C**reated in 1974 by the Ford Foundation and a group of federal agencies, MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve programs and policies that affect the poor.

To that end, we design and test promising new interventions, evaluate existing programs using the highest research standards, and provide design and implementation assistance to build better programs that can be replicated and expanded. We helped pioneer the use of random assignment in real-world settings and have developed new methods in implementation research and the study of variation in program impacts.

We bring together public and private funders to test new ideas and communicate what we learn to policymakers and service providers. From welfare policy to high school reform, MDRC has helped to shape legislation, program design, and operational practices. In fields where emotion and ideology often dominate, MDRC is a go-to source for objective, unbiased evidence.

Over the years, we have brought our unique strengths to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Today we work to improve early education programs, public school reforms, efforts to help low-income people earn a postsecondary credential, initiatives to raise the income of low-wage workers, interventions for at-risk teenagers, and employment programs for ex-prisoners. We are known for the high quality, integrity, and rigor of our research, carried out in partnership with school districts; community colleges; federal, state, and local governments; foundations; and nonprofit organizations.

With a staff of some 350 in New York City; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles, MDRC is engaged in more than 100 projects clustered in five policy areas: Family Well-Being and Children's Development, K-12 Education, Postsecondary Education, Low-Wage Workers and Communities, and Youth Development, Criminal Justice, and Employment. In each area, we strive to build a reliable body of evidence about what works and select new projects because they offer the potential to answer the next important question.

For our work to make a difference, it must reach a wide audience. We complement clearly written reports with policy briefs, how-to guides, videos, podcasts, and hands-on technical assistance. And we share our findings with the media and public interest groups, in testimony before Congress and state legislatures, through email news bulletins, on social media, and on our website, [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org).



**In fields where emotion and ideology often dominate, MDRC is a go-to source for objective, unbiased evidence.**

# FROM THE PRESIDENT

If they are to improve the lives of low-income Americans, programs must actually work. To know which ones work, we need reliable evidence. It can sometimes be difficult to act on that evidence. But we have made good progress over the years in identifying programs and policies that do make a difference.

The next challenge, though, is to learn to successfully expand effective programs. Many people imagine the process behind evidence-based policy to be a simple linear one: rigorously measure the results of an intervention in a place or two, and if there is evidence of success, expand it to a larger, possibly national scale. A process along these lines has guided the Food and Drug Administration in its approval of new medicines. But as the social sciences gain sophistication, that process seems increasingly insufficient.

One important warning sign is that efforts to replicate promising findings often disappoint. Why? It is frequently assumed that the replication failed to implement the model properly; indeed, maintaining “fidelity” to a model can be a challenge as a program expands. But context can also matter. When programs expand, they have to adapt. They must serve new populations that may be demographically and culturally different, and they must operate in new local systems with different policies, procedures, and service networks. They may also face new challenges simply because the fundamental nature of a problem changes over time. For example, early childhood home-visiting programs to strengthen parenting are well supported by evidence, but when they began, opioid use was not the crisis in America that it is today.

To help the field adapt, the way we approach evidence building and the tools we use must change. Over the last five years we have been hard at work making those kinds of changes at MDRC. Recognizing that many of the nation’s programs and services are delivered by nonprofit organizations or by state and local governments, we have used our research and practice expertise to develop tools to help those entities reliably evaluate programs’ effectiveness, use what is learned to identify strengths and weaknesses, and apply that information to improve performance.

We have developed low-cost behavioral science techniques, for example, that can be used to diagnose obstacles to participant recruitment and engagement so that programs can address them. We are using predictive analytics to help programs improve their targeting and more clearly estimate participants’ risk of not meeting their goals. We are using our experience won from years of research and on-the-ground work to help organizations create databases to track services and outcomes. We have also increased the sophistication of our implementation research, leading to better information about how programs are making a difference, for whom, and why.

The objective is to use all of this information to help programs and governments become learning organizations capable of adapting and tailoring existing services and spurring the development of new implementation strategies or program components. We also aim to help them use existing management and administrative data (along with insights from variation in implementation) to do quick-turnaround tests of these new ideas and improve their performance.

As described in the pages that follow, we are using similar approaches to help shape policies and programs in areas ranging from informing school choice to making work pay; from welfare systems and child support offices to preschools, high schools, and community colleges; and from criminal justice reform to career and technical education and sectoral training that can help young people and adults get on sustainable career paths. The resulting portfolio of projects is concentrated at important transition points in a person’s life and intended to improve upward mobility from birth to adulthood, and from education to career advancement.



**Gordon L. Berlin**  
President

Over the past decade and a half, a bipartisan consensus has emerged in Washington about the role of evidence. Republicans and Democrats agree that programs should be tested rigorously to see whether they work — and that programs backed by strong evidence of success should be protected and expanded. In the early 2000s, the Bush administration’s Office of Management and Budget pushed federal agencies to focus on developing rigorous evidence and Congress created the Institute of Education Sciences. At the end of the decade, the federal government built partnerships with the nonprofit and philanthropic communities and defined tiered standards of evidence. In more recent years, Congress has taken the lead, creating new evidence-building frameworks and pay-for-success initiatives that seek to support innovation and stronger results. For example, Congress established the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking in 2016 and included evidence provisions in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

This growing consensus suggests that not only programs’ return on investment but also their future federal funding prospects have and will be based on their ability to produce reliable evidence. Although some in the philanthropic sector may have grown frustrated by the elusiveness of good evidence to support important programs, and skeptical of the centrality of evidence, the hard truth is that federal funds to sustain and expand programs are likely to shrink under the current presidential administration. And the president’s proposed 2018 budget stated unequivocally that evidence would be a factor in deciding which programs get access to this shrinking pot.

In the end, philanthropies cannot sustain programs on their own. Philanthropic funders can be patient, but their support is seldom permanent, and the programs that are more likely to be sustained and expanded by government funding are those that can show their benefits for children and families, their effects in ameliorating social problems, their return on investment for philanthropies and taxpayers alike. More and more cities and states are embracing evidence to guide their investments as well, with implications for practitioners, funders, advocates, and allies at all levels. That is, after all, the goal of the evidence-based movement: to advance smart investments in programs that actually work.

On the other hand, skeptics of evidence may fear that a program without evidence of success may be shut down, and nothing put in its place. In the early 1990s, for example, a national evaluation of the Job Training Partnership Act’s youth employment programs found few effects, and Congress moved decisively to defund all of the act’s programs. But no research and development investments were made to learn what might work better. Twenty years later, the nation has suffered through its worst youth unemployment crisis in history, and while Congress did make investments in research into youth employment in 2014, many years and lives were wasted in the interim.

Eventually, we do have to say no when efforts to enhance a given approach repeatedly fail to produce evidence of effectiveness. But that does not mean inaction when problems remain pressing. The evidence-building movement must remain focused on long-term goals, and its tactics must be designed to reach those goals. That is why it is so important that MDRC has committed to transforming itself. It is addressing the evidence-based movement’s Achilles’ heel of program replication and expansion, and it has added many other new methods and new ways of working with partners that provide much more than the answer to simple yes-or-no impact questions. These kinds of efforts — using evidence as a *part of* continuing program improvement rather than as an alternative to it — represent the future of the evidence-based movement.



**Mary Jo Bane**  
Chair, Board of Directors



**FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN**

Improving children’s early developmental and educational outcomes

- Home visiting for new parents
- Early care/education and preschool programs
- Responsible fatherhood programs
- Strengthening parent and family relationships
- Developing early language, literacy, and math skills and school readiness
- Decreasing child support arrears

**K-12 EDUCATION**

Helping students succeed and implementing and expanding effective interventions

- Elementary reading and math instruction
- Teacher training and curriculum improvement
- Identifying students who are at risk of failing
- Academic, social, and behavioral services for at-risk students, in school, after school, or in the summer
- Secondary school reform
- Career and technical education
- College access and readiness

**DISCONNECTED YOUNG PEOPLE**

Testing initiatives that encourage vulnerable young people to become productive adults

- Educational programs, job training, and leadership development for out-of-school youths
- Services for those who are aging out of foster care
- Supportive programs for young people leaving or at risk of entering juvenile justice facilities
- Raising academic achievement for economically disadvantaged students

**POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

Working on innovative programs to help low-income students enroll, progress, and graduate

- Replicating programs that use academic and social supports to boost graduation rates
- Reform of developmental education
- Financial aid reforms, including performance-based scholarships
- Encouraging summer enrollment

**WORK, HOUSING, INCOME SECURITY**

Raising the economic prospects of low-wage workers, people who are jobless, and communities where poverty is concentrated

- Expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit to single adults without dependent children
- Antipoverty programs using conditional cash transfers
- Employment among public housing residents and recipients of housing subsidies
- Sector-based job training
- Financial capabilities and asset-building
- Using behavioral science insights to improve delivery of human services programs

**HEALTH**

Enhancing health care services and health outcomes for low-income people

- Home visiting to improve the health of mothers and infants
- Women’s reproductive health and long-acting reversible contraceptives
- Mental health treatment for children and adolescents affected by trauma

**CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

Building evidence on reforms to reduce incarceration and recidivism

- Transitional employment programs and support services for former prisoners
- Pilot programs using cognitive behavioral therapy
- Pretrial release and community supervision
- Helping incarcerated parents modify child support orders



## Pathways to Better Jobs

### *Sectoral Training and Career and Technical Education*

Even when the unemployment rate is low, many adults struggle to progress beyond entry-level, low-wage work. At the same time, businesses lack workers to fill middle-skill jobs — such as machinists, computer technicians, and medical assistants. MDRC has found great promise in programs offering career pathways. For students, they link high schools, colleges, and businesses and align educational options with work opportunities. For unemployed or low-wage workers, training and placement programs partner with employers to target jobs in high-demand sectors. MDRC’s landmark 1993-2008 study of career academies in high schools and, more recently, our evaluation of WorkAdvance, a sectoral training program for low-income adults, found that both models were successful in boosting participants’ employment and earnings.

Career and technical education increasingly focuses on preparing students for success in both college and the workforce. The Next Generation California Partnership Academies initiative will provide about 20 career academies — small learning communities within large high schools that align rigorous academics with career training and internships — with technical assistance to raise their capacity and effectiveness. MDRC will then track students’ outcomes for eight years after high school. Related research involves YouthForce NOLA, a business-nonprofit alliance that promotes work-based learning in biotech, skilled crafts, and digital industries in New Orleans high schools, and seven Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECHs) in New York City. The P-TECH model is a six-year high school that offers students industry mentors, paid internships, and the chance to graduate with a high school diploma, an associate’s degree, and a guarantee of preference for a job with a school’s industry partner. The model has already been replicated in 40 schools.

In WorkAdvance, providers in New York, Ohio, and Oklahoma built relationships with local employers in sectors likely to offer a career path and rising wages. MDRC found that successful programs were nimble and responsive to industry changes, adapting courses to match trainees’ skills with available jobs. After two years, WorkAdvance participants were earning nearly \$2,000, or 14 percent, more than their counterparts. MDRC is continuing to follow participants to see whether the program’s substantial effects are sustained.

“Unemployed after cycling through temporary jobs in insurance, accounting, and real estate, Lisa Edwards...came across a flier.... It was for a ‘women in technology’ program offered by Per Scholas, a nonprofit offering low-income workers training in information technology. Five months later, Ms. Edwards landed on the leading edge of a promising approach to helping embattled workers attain and hold on to a middle-class life....”

— EDUARDO PORTER, *The New York Times*, on MDRC’s WorkAdvance demonstration

## Partnerships to Improve Programs

### *The Center for Employment Opportunities and Communities In Schools*

MDRC has worked for many years with key nonprofit organizations to evaluate their programs’ models, refine them in response to the evaluations, and replicate and expand them. Two great examples of this iterative process can be found in MDRC’s partnerships with the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) and Communities In Schools (CIS).

CEO runs transitional employment programs that offer temporary jobs to recently released prisoners. MDRC first began working with CEO in 2003; an initial study of CEO’s program in New York City found that the temporary jobs improved employment in the short term but did not have long-term effects. The program did reduce the rate at which

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# 3 Degree *in three*



participants committed new crimes or were reincarcerated — especially among certain subgroups. CEO has since expanded to serve more former prisoners in more locations and has refined its services using what it learned from the initial evaluation and later MDRC studies. It now puts more emphasis on helping participants find permanent jobs and has worked with MDRC to test cognitive behavioral workshops to help participants avoid reoffending and develop coping skills for the workplace. MDRC is currently using predictive analytics to help CEO better target its services.

CIS is a dropout-prevention organization whose whole-school model integrates a variety of support services for students in elementary, middle, and high schools. It makes some services available to all students and provides others through case management to those most at risk of dropping out. MDRC's evaluation found that while there were promising results for the whole-school model's impact on elementary grade attendance and high school graduation, the case management component did not affect students' attendance, discipline, or course outcomes. Moderate-risk students and higher-risk students received similar amounts of case management services. CIS had been using a two-tier service-delivery model, but this finding prompted a shift to a three-tier model to provide greater differentiation. MDRC's research also suggested that CIS case management may work best for students if it begins when they enter middle or high school, so CIS has redoubled its efforts to target students during those transitional years.

## Moving the Needle on Graduation Rates

### *Replicating ASAP's Success in Ohio*

**G**raduation rates at community colleges are discouragingly low for the millions of students who enter college without the math, reading, or writing skills needed for college-level courses. Some 60 percent of community college students must take remedial courses. But only 15 percent of them graduate within three years.

To move the needle on graduation rates, the City University of New York (CUNY) launched an ambitious program — Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) — at six New York City community colleges in 2007. It required that students go to school full time, take remedial courses early, and aim to earn a degree within three years. In return, it also offered an array of supports, including enhanced advising, tutoring, free textbooks, and tuition and transportation aid. MDRC's random assignment study found that the program nearly doubled graduation rates and boosted the number of students who enrolled in four-year colleges — results that are unparalleled in studies of community college interventions. CUNY has since expanded ASAP to serve 25,000 students on nine campuses by 2018. But would its model be as effective at other colleges, in different settings, with different student populations?

The ASAP Ohio Demonstration seeks to replicate CUNY's success at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Cuyahoga Community College, and Lorain County Community College. These decentralized colleges serve as ideal proving grounds for ASAP. Their students are somewhat older than the New York students, are more likely to be parents and to be working, and come from a variety of urban, suburban, and rural areas. With technical assistance from CUNY, MDRC is evaluating how Ohio's results compare with CUNY's, what effects the programs have on academic performance, and how cost-effective they are. The early findings are positive. In the first two semesters, the programs substantially increased participants' full-time enrollment, credit accumulation, and persistence in college. MDRC will continue tracking students' outcomes in Ohio for at least another two years. Meanwhile, with CUNY's help, both Skyline College in California and Westchester Community College in New York are implementing programs based on ASAP.

“Cuyahoga student Monolitta Carrington said [that]...signing up for the intense [ASAP] program was ‘one of the best decisions that I’ve made, as far as my college career.’...She said the personal support during final exams, or when she is concerned about a particular course, has helped boost her confidence to persist.”

— MELISSA KORN, *The Wall Street Journal*, on the ASAP program in Ohio





## Who Is At Risk of Failing? *Using Predictive Analytics to Find Out*

**m**DRC has an enduring and productive partnership with New Visions for Public Schools, which supports more than 200 New York City schools through professional development, coaching, technology assistance, curriculum guides, and other tools. One of our recent collaborations involves predictive analytics — an innovative method for identifying risk that has been used in the business, health, and sports worlds and is now making inroads in the field of education.

Many low-income young people are not reaching important educational milestones, like completing an academic program or graduating on time. But social service organizations and schools often have difficulty estimating the risk of failing to reach such milestones, which means they miss opportunities to help students in need or give services to those who do not need them. Schools and school districts are increasingly using early warning systems that rely on a few measures to identify risk, like absences, behavior, and course performance. Yet this approach could benefit from a wealth of additional data that could help schools identify risk earlier and more precisely.

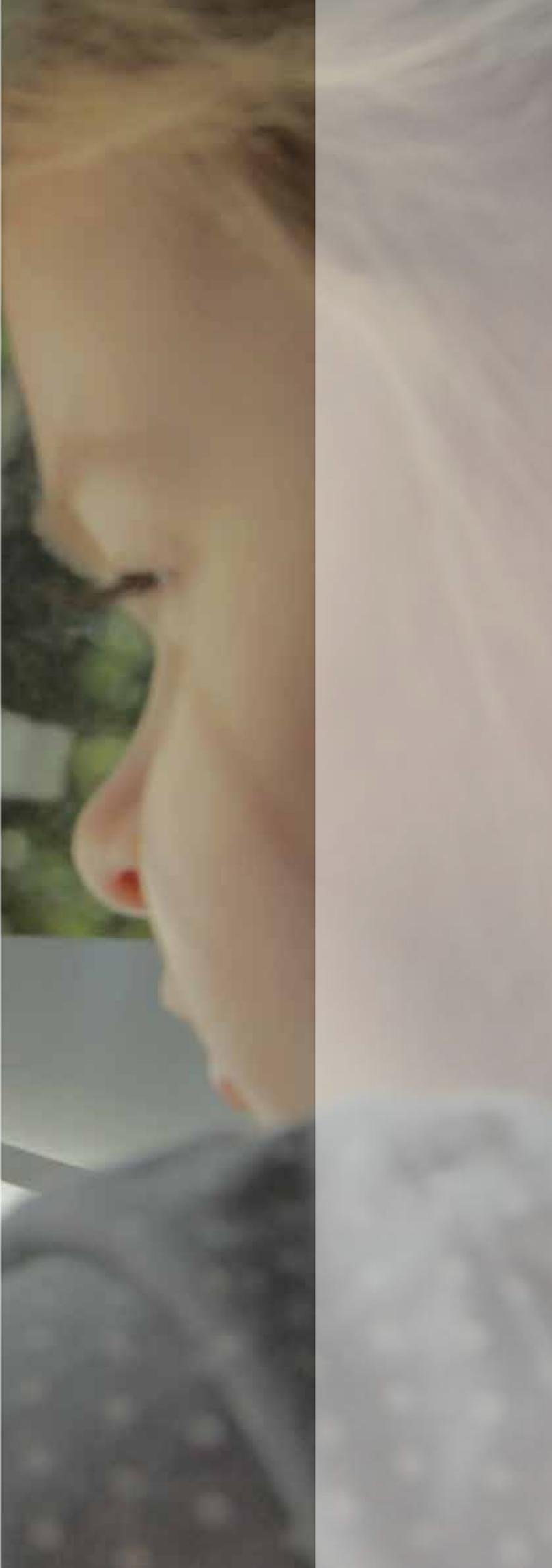
Predictive analytics is one way to capture those data. With this approach, hundreds of measures, rather than a few, can be considered. MDRC's predictive analytics work uses cutting-edge methods and a field-tested framework, based on a model developed by New Visions, to identify students at risk while they can still be helped. Using data from 70 New Visions high schools, our researchers developed this framework to estimate students' probability of not graduating on time and of failing New York State's algebra exam, required for graduation.

MDRC can work with school districts or social service or intermediary organizations to determine whether predictive analytics would be valuable for them and whether they have the organizational capacity and data to support it. Our staff can then help identify milestones for students' progress, calculate the likelihood that a student will not reach that milestone, and incorporate the results into tracking systems. MDRC can also provide analyses to help educators decide on next steps — how best to intervene and for whom.

## Small Changes, Big Gains *MDRC's Center for Applied Behavioral Science*

**t**oo often, social programs and policies do not consider the way people actually think and behave. It is generally assumed that those most in need will act in their own best interest, but research in behavioral science demonstrates that even small hassles can deter those who need services from getting them. The research also shows that modest changes in program outreach or in how information is conveyed can help people make decisions and act in ways that support their goals. For instance, in a series of tests conducted in two Ohio counties as part of the federally funded Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project, MDRC found that sending child support payment reminder notices to parents significantly increased the number of those who made at least one payment. And in New York City, simplified postcard and text-message reminders that made deadlines more prominent prompted economically vulnerable adults to attend a meeting about a program designed to supplement their earnings. Some 100,000 people nationwide participated in the BIAS tests, and most of the low-cost interventions had positive impacts.

To build on this research, MDRC launched the Center for Applied Behavioral Science (CABS) in 2015. CABS combines MDRC's expertise in social programs with cutting-edge behavioral science techniques to develop light-touch, high-impact interventions that improve the effectiveness of programs and the experiences of their participants. Typically, CABS partners with a social service agency or educational institution, and together they



identify problems that are most amenable to behavioral solutions. CABS provides technical assistance and customized training, designs interventions that incorporate behavioral insights, and conducts randomized controlled trial evaluations of service design changes. These changes tend to be low cost and easy to implement, making rigorous evaluation feasible even when resources are limited.

So far, CABS has teamed up with more than 30 organizations in 15 states to develop behavioral strategies aimed at improving child support, child care, welfare, education, and other systems. CABS also has incorporated behavioral science into broader MDRC initiatives and has educated policymakers and practitioners on how to use it to improve programs.

## Sustaining Children's Early Learning

### *What Works Best?*

Young children from low-income families, particularly those who are nonwhite or whose first language is not English, continue to lag behind their peers in school readiness and later academic achievement. Spurred by evidence that some preschool and early care and education programs can better prepare children for kindergarten, states and localities are expanding these programs. But which programs and curricula work best to sustain children's preschool gains into the elementary grades and beyond, especially when they operate on a large scale? Three Expanding Children's Early Learning (ExCEL) Network projects are launching to answer that question.

The ExCEL Network is a collaboration led by MDRC that engages local officials, preschool providers, and researchers as active partners in innovation and evidence building. The first project to get under way is ExCEL P-3 (Promoting Sustained Gains from Preschool to Third Grade), a six-year study in the Boston Public Schools. It seeks to confirm whether a preschool program that combines evidence-based curricula with training and coaching for teachers, reinforced by a system-wide alignment of instruction from kindergarten through third grade, will make a lasting difference for children.

ExCEL Quality (Improving Preschool Instruction through Curricula, Coaching, and Training) addresses a critical decision: the selection of effective combinations of curricula and professional development. Working in two localities, it will measure the effects of two different combinations of curricula and professional development on children's early skills and outcomes. One is likely to be a widely used comprehensive curriculum and the other a standard curriculum with enhancements that takes a more in-depth approach to particular skill domains, such as language, literacy, and math. Both curricula will be delivered with the support of intensive teacher training and coaching.

The goal of ExCEL Summer (Boosting School Readiness through a Summer Enrichment Program) is to find out whether a six-week, academic enrichment summer school program can prevent summer learning loss and bolster kindergarten readiness for children who went to preschool. The program also will be tested for children who did not go to preschool to find out whether a short-term intervention can help them make a stronger start.

“ I applaud the collaboration between OPRE\* and MDRC, which represents the first time that a federal agency has sought to implement behavioral insights into safety net programs. ”

— SHELDON DANZIGER, President, Russell Sage Foundation, and Distinguished University Professor of Public Policy Emeritus, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan

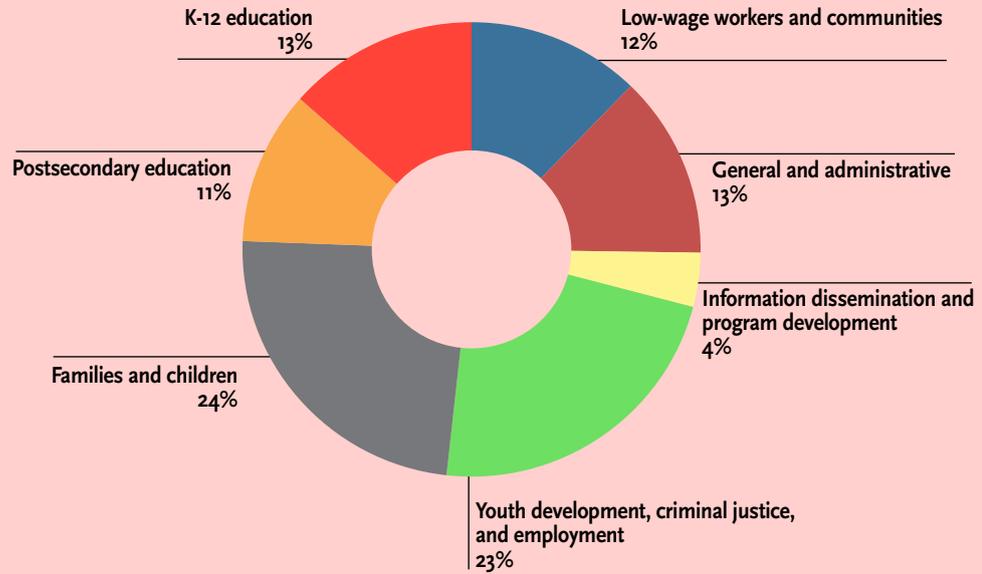
\*Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

## 2017 Budget: \$89 million

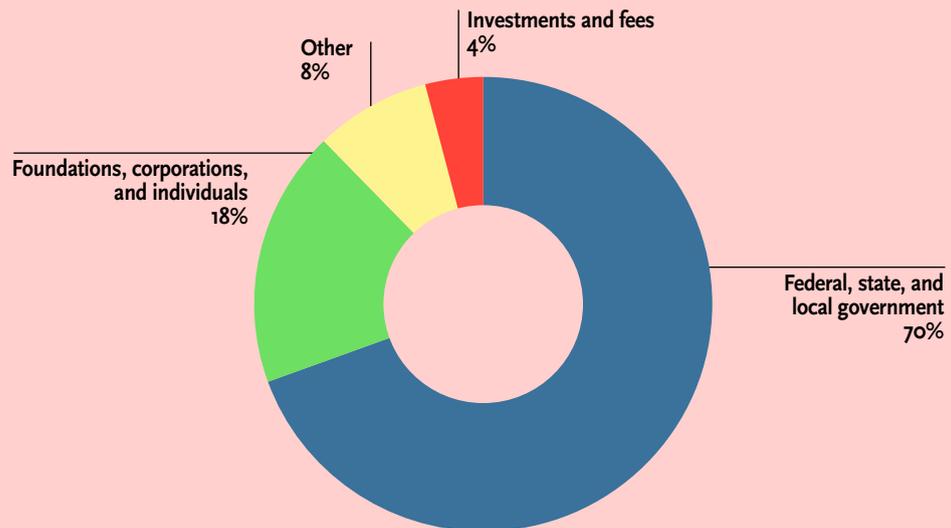


\* Pass-through expenses include payments to sites for program expenses, to subcontractors for services, and to survey firms.

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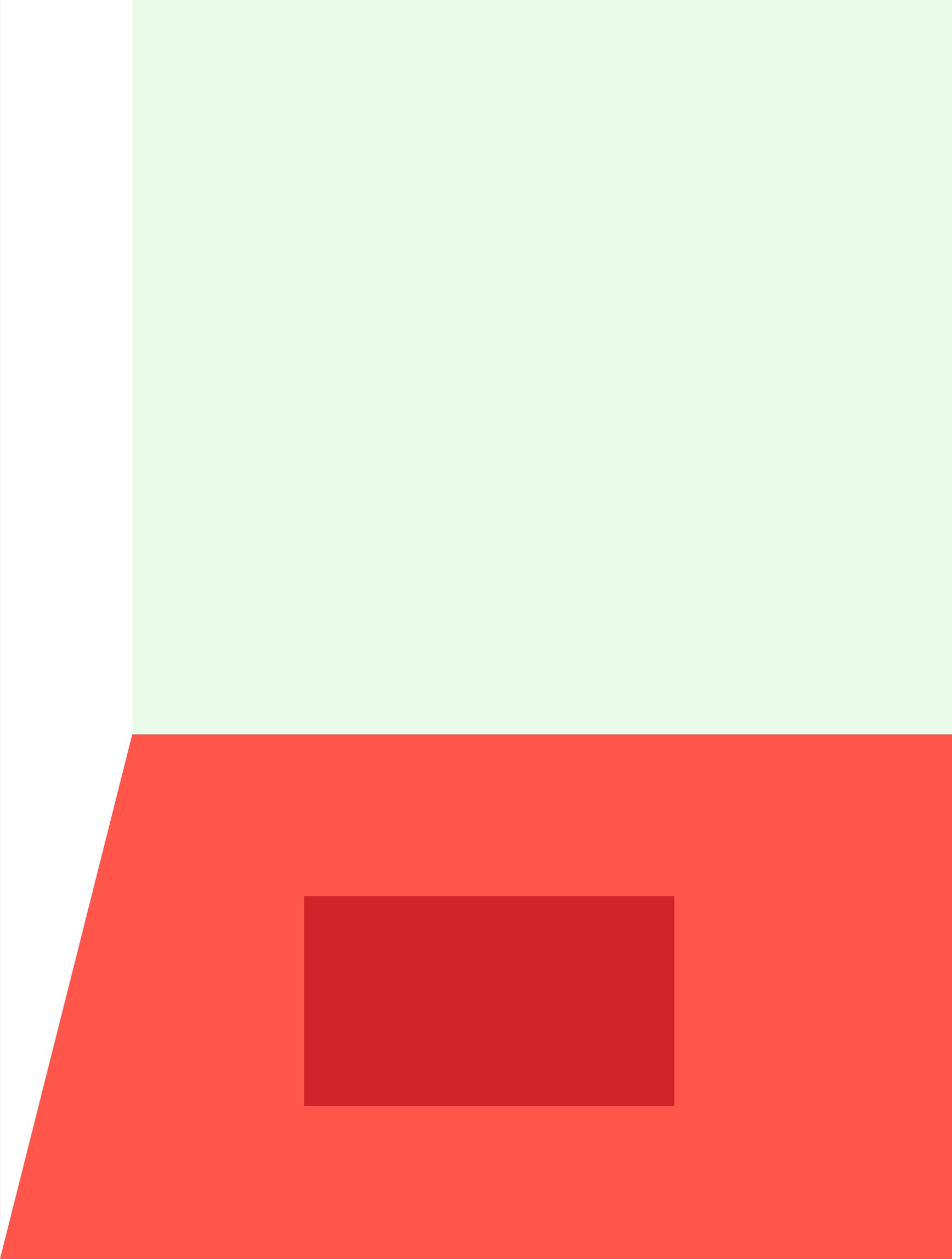
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