

# Rapid Learning:

## Methods for Testing and Evaluating Change in Social Service Programs

### *Summary of OPRE 2018 Innovative Methods Meeting*



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R. HOLZWART AND H. WAGNER  
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Social service program stakeholders need timely evidence to inform ongoing program decisions. Rapid learning methods, defined here as a set of approaches designed to quickly and/or iteratively test program improvements and evaluate program implementation or impact, can help inform such decisions. However, stakeholders may be unsure which rapid learning methods are most appropriate for a program's specific challenges and how best to apply the methods. Additionally, they may be unsure how to cultivate a culture of continuous, iterative learning.

#### **What are Rapid Learning Methods?**

For the purposes of the 2018 Innovative Methods Meeting, OPRE defined these methods broadly as a set of approaches that can quickly or iteratively test program improvements and evaluate program implementation or impact. There are numerous approaches to help support rapid learning (e.g., Rapid Cycle Evaluation and Continuous Quality Improvement, including specific strategies like Plan Do Study Act cycles). All use data, some employ methods to determine causality, and some incorporate advanced statistical methods to make predictions.

On October 25 and 26, 2018, the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) convened a meeting for participants from Federal agencies, research firms, academia, and other organizations to discuss topics related to rapid learning methods. Participants explored several questions:

- ▶ What are some important considerations when selecting and implementing rapid learning methods?
- ▶ How have researchers and practitioners successfully used rapid learning methods to improve and evaluate programs in the field?
- ▶ How have rapid learning methods helped answer practice- or policy-relevant questions?
- ▶ How do you build a lasting culture of learning within programs and organizations?

This meeting summary describes the presentations and highlights themes that emerged.



## WHAT ARE SOME IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SELECTING AND IMPLEMENTING RAPID LEARNING METHODS?

Presentations at the 2018 innovative methods meeting highlighted several steps that are common across rapid learning approaches. Typically rapid learning approach implementers begin by examining their objectives. Then, they identify a strategic change to test, create hypotheses for potential improvements, determine the appropriate measurement, and analyze the outcomes and make decisions.

Meeting presenters discussed several considerations for selecting a rapid learning method and implementing and testing program changes:

- ▶ **Let the context determine the methods for rapid improvement.** Many rapid learning methods can help test change, but selecting the best one depends on several contextual factors, including decision-maker needs, program staff readiness for adopting the intervention, and the level of confidence needed in the findings.



- ▶ **Remember that factors that drive the timeline are context-specific.** Key elements of testing program changes, such as time-to-impact, data availability, and sample size, vary from one program to the next. These factors can influence how rapidly decision-makers can learn from each test.
- ▶ **Keep learning and improving.** A program's environment is dynamic, with ever-changing policy, economic, and social factors at play. As a result, what works today may not work—or may not work as well—tomorrow. Researchers should anticipate the ongoing nature of learning and improvement.

**There is no one size fits all approach to rapid learning. The optimal rapid learning method for a given situation depends on how the results will be used, how quickly the results are needed, what data are available, and the consequences of being wrong, among other factors.**

Summarized from MaryCatherine Arbour and Scott Cody's presentation,  
*Rapid Learning: Methods for Testing and Evaluating Change in Social Programs*

With these questions and priorities in mind, the presenters highlighted an array of methodologies to test program improvement. Presenters encouraged attendees to focus not on the jargon but on the methods' underlying principles. Approaches and terminology vary widely from one setting to the next, which can make learning about these methods confusing.

## HOW HAVE RESEARCHERS SUCCESSFULLY USED RAPID LEARNING METHODS TO IMPROVE AND EVALUATE PROGRAMS IN THE FIELD?

Presenters shared applications of rapid learning methods and associated frameworks in the field.

- ▶ Researchers from Mathematica discussed two relevant projects. In the first, they helped a Texas school district test the effectiveness of a one-on-one reading intervention for second-grade students using an online, open-source toolkit called the [Rapid Cycle Evaluation Coach](#), which is available to schools and districts at no cost. In the second, they worked closely with staff from Jefferson County, Colorado's Department of Human Services, to implement an analytic, rapid learning framework called [Learn, Innovate, Improve \(known as LI<sup>2</sup>\)](#). LI<sup>2</sup> aimed to build practitioner capacity to improve client engagement in TANF programs, by providing effective tools to collect research data that could be used to inform program decisions and practice.
- ▶ A team from the University of Massachusetts Boston worked with Boston's Public Health Commission and the federally funded Defending Childhood initiative to investigate the use of a [continuous quality improvement approach](#) to promote the adoption of trauma-informed practices in early childhood education contexts.
- ▶ A team from the University of Pennsylvania and Abt Associates embedded a series of mini-experimental

tests of improvement strategies into routines of practice to study a modified version of [Year Up](#), a job training program that helps prepare low-income youth for career-focused employment after graduation.

- ▶ Researchers from the University of Maryland used continuous quality improvement and evaluation methodologies to study the State's Department of Juvenile Services' implementation of [Multisystemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy](#), two evidence-based in-home therapies.



Although these projects employed varied methods, presenters discussed common lessons learned. Many addressed the “how” and the “why” of rapid learning methods—delving further into the methodologies to explore the mechanisms for producing change. Several presenters also discussed program readiness for change, processes for designing different interventions to test, costs associated with implementation, and effective engagement with partners. Many presenters also encouraged methodological capacity building within programs or organizations to support data-driven decision-making.

## HOW HAVE RAPID LEARNING METHODS HELPED ANSWER PRACTICE- OR POLICY-RELEVANT QUESTIONS?

Two roundtable discussions focused on supporting the implementation of rapid learning methods in the field and using these methods to answer practice- or policy-relevant questions.

### Considerations for implementing rapid learning methods

The first roundtable provided an organizational perspective on implementing rapid learning methods in different settings, focusing on working with organizations at different stages of readiness. Panelists discussed the need for researchers to customize their tools and strategies with each new partner organization, making adjustments based on programs' current capacity to incorporate data-driven decision-making into their organizational cultures.

Panelists noted that some organizations might be ready to assess program impacts and outcomes, while others might need to first examine program fidelity. When working with a new organization, panelists typically begin assessing programs' readiness and commitment through activities such as conducting in-depth application processes with interested organizations, signing contracts with partner organizations, and holding multiday workshops with organization staff at a project's outset. Panelists noted the importance of obtaining stakeholder buy-in and agreement at the start of a new project to ensure all partners understand the goals, define data similarly, and agree on inputs and outcomes. They found it particularly helpful

to work closely with decision-makers and authority figures within each organization to ensure their ongoing support. They also discussed using technology to make data more accessible across various partners and teams. Throughout the discussion, panelists reflected on the idea of rigor, noting that in some organizations, just getting team members to understand data and incorporate it into their decision-making is a major achievement.

### Considerations for using rapid learning methods in government agencies

The second roundtable explored the use of rapid learning methods to inform policy. Panelists included Federal and local government staff and policy researchers, who reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of using rapid learning in their work. Panelists noted that rapid learning methods can be beneficial in these contexts because they align with government decision-making timelines and they support constantly changing leadership and programs. Rapid learning methods can also produce data at critical junctures that align with the real-time pressures policymakers face. These methods can help reduce potential harm to program

**Deadlines and action forcing events pressure policymakers to make decisions with only the information they have available (which may be minimal). One goal of researchers should be to reduce the uncertainty associated with making those decisions.**

Summarized from *Using Rapid Learning Methods to Answer Policy Relevant Questions Roundtable*

participants by gradually and iteratively testing program changes. Potential pitfalls include the risk of measuring what is easily measurable, rather than what needs to be measured, and the challenge of balancing feasibility and speed versus rigor. The panel touched on additional topics such as using performance measures to identify areas for program improvement and testing, providing results in a way that is easily understood by policymakers, and evaluating rapid learning methods in a policy context.

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## HOW DO YOU BUILD A LASTING CULTURE OF LEARNING WITHIN PROGRAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS?

Presenters shared their suggestions for building a lasting culture of learning within programs and organizations, drawing from their experiences implementing collaborative learning and continuous improvement approaches in the field of home visiting. They recommended that organizations build internal capacity to implement changes and test data on their own, if they wish to do so even after researchers' projects have ended. Presenters made the following suggestions,

based on their work in home visiting but applicable to various kinds of programs:

- ▶ Address topics that truly matter to program participants.
  - ▶ Invest time to coach and build skills among program and organization staff (e.g., engage passionate experts who are willing to do hands-on work, offer longer training and coaching periods than might be typical).
  - ▶ Develop a culture of “all teach, all learn,” in which participants’ voices and expertise are acknowledged and sought out.
  - ▶ Seek and foster leadership support so leaders will in turn continue to support their teams (e.g., advocate for training and resources, permit experimentation and failure).
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## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

To access the online meeting archive, including a detailed schedule, meeting materials, and presentation slides, please visit the OPRE Innovative Methods Meeting website at [www.opremethodsmeeting.org](http://www.opremethodsmeeting.org). The site also includes materials from other innovative methods meetings OPRE has organized, and it will be updated to include future meetings.

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## MEETING AGENDA

### Rapid Learning: Methods for Testing and Evaluating Change in Social Service Programs

October 25–26, 2018, Holiday Inn Washington–Capitol, Washington, DC

#### Day 1, Thursday, October 25

##### Greetings

Naomi Goldstein (Deputy Assistant Secretary for Planning, Research & Evaluation)  
Emily Schmitt (Deputy Director for the Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation)

##### Rapid Learning: Methods for Testing and Evaluating Change in Social Programs

Scott Cody (Insight Policy Research)  
MaryCatherine Arbour (Harvard University)

##### Considerations for Using Rapid Learning Methods, Part 1

*The Rapid Cycle Evaluation Coach: Building Capacity and Informing Decisions*

Kate Place (Mathematica Policy Research)

*The Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Trauma-Informed Early Care and Education*

Anne Douglass (University of Massachusetts Boston)

*Using Rapid Learning Methods to Design and Test Promising Interventions for Low-Income Families: Jefferson County (CO) Department of Human Services*

Michelle Derr, Annalisa Mastri (Mathematica Policy Research)

##### Considerations for Using Rapid Learning Methods, Part 2

*Improvement Science With a Twist: Embedding an Experimental Test of Improvement Strategies Into Routines of Practice*

Rebecca Maynard (University of Pennsylvania)

*Supporting Multisystemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy Implementation With CQI & Evaluation in Maryland*

Jill Farrell (University of Maryland)

##### Supporting the Implementation of Rapid Learning Methods: Perspectives From the Field

###### Panelists:

Jodi Sandfort (University of Minnesota)  
Tyson Barker (University of Oregon)  
Robert Goerge (Chapin Hall)  
Bi Vuong (Harvard University)

###### Moderator:

Virginia Knox (MDRC)

#### Day 2, Friday, October 25

##### Using Rapid Learning Methods to Answer Policy-Relevant Questions

###### Panelists:

Kinsey Dinan (New York City Department of Social Services)  
Nick Hart (Bipartisan Policy Center)  
Jennifer Lloyd (The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services)

###### Moderator:

Erica Zielewski (Office of Management and Budget)

##### Creating a Lasting Culture of Rapid Learning

*Developing, Maintaining, and Spreading a Culture of Rapid Cycle Learning Within Home Visiting: Lessons Learned*

Mary Mackrain (Education Development Center)  
Julia Heany (Michigan Public Health Institute)



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