

# Evaluation Report Brief

## The Guidance Center: Families and Schools Together

### What is the community challenge?

River Rouge is a community of 7,903 in Wayne County, Michigan where about a quarter of families live below the poverty line. Many parents and caregivers do not have the skills needed to provide the early learning foundations for the young children in their care.

### What is the promising solution?

The River Rouge community, led by The Guidance Center and its Walter White Community Resource Center, designed and implemented a comprehensive community-driven, socially-innovative approach to kindergarten readiness. One of these interventions, Families and Schools Together (FAST), is a multi-family learning and support group that focuses on the developmental and behaviorally based needs of preschool-age children as well as the needs of their parents. FAST programs last for 10 weeks of 2 ½ hour meetings each week.

**Program At-a-Glance**

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund (SIF)

Intervention: Families and Schools Together (FAST)

Subgrantee: The Guidance Center

Intermediary: United Way of Southeastern Michigan

Focus Area(s): Education

Focus Population(s): Children ages 0-8 and their caregivers

Community Served: River Rouge, Michigan

### What was the purpose of evaluation?

The impact evaluation of The Guidance Center's FAST intervention by Innovatus Consulting, LLC, began in 2013 and finished reporting in 2015. The study investigated whether parents whose family participated in FAST report significantly better family functioning and less parenting stress than the national average for parents who did not participate in FAST, and also looked into whether children whose parents participated in FAST showed gains in Kindergarten readiness areas compared to children whose parents did not participate.

### What did the evaluation find?

As a subgrantee of United Way of Southeastern Michigan, The Guidance Center engaged an independent evaluator to evaluate FAST. The evaluation utilized a quasi-experimental design with a pre/post test and a non-random pseudo-control group comprised of the national FAST evaluation sample. The Guidance Center reported that three cohorts of FAST were implemented. Over 100 families were recruited for FAST; 50% of those agreed to attend; 46% attended at least one session; and 46% graduated (21 families in total graduated).

Parents (N=17) completed pre/post survey assessments that showed statistically significant improvement in:

- Parent's relationship with the FAST child;
- Reduction in conduct problems for the FAST child as reported by parents;
- Improved community-social relationships for parents;
- Improved total social relationships for parents;
- Tangible support for parents (help with cooking, chores, child time)
- Emotional support (listening, getting together, getting advice); and
- Total support for parents.

## Notes on the evaluation

The evaluation showed promising findings on FAST's ability to support families raising small children, including preparing children for Kindergarten. However, the study's small sample size and lack of a matched comparison group limited evidence of impact.

The evaluators had originally proposed using a propensity score matched design to compare non-FAST families. However, due to limited ability to recruit control families and the shortened time-frame of the project, this aspect of the design was not implemented. This limitation is a function of the early exit of the program from the SIF portfolio rather than factors directly related to the design of the evaluation or the sampling/recruiting procedures.

## How is The Guidance Center using the evaluation findings to improve?

The evaluators conducted focus groups with participants at the conclusion of each FAST cycle to obtain feedback on aspects of the program that they believe need improvement.

The evaluation concluded that one of the lessons learned related to designing and implementing a locally-driven initiative within the context of sometimes rigid federal guidelines. Two guidelines influenced the design of the River Rouge project in a less than desired way:

- (1) The requirement that families be River Rouge residents and reside in a specific zip code; and
- (2) The moderate level of evidence needed to be achieved through the evaluation of each SIF program.

The requirement that participants live within a certain zip code significantly reduced the number of potential participants given the fluid boundaries that exist across River Rouge and its neighboring communities. The Guidance Center's original design was modified during Year Two to meet SIF evidence requirements; this caused a shift in the theory of change as well as shift in staffing and approach to the work.

### Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Design(s): Quasi-experimental

Study Population: Caregivers of children ages 0-8

(Independent) Evaluator: Innovatus Consulting, LLC

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence\*: Preliminary

\*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

### Wayne County, Michigan



The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.