Childhood Prosperity Lab

Summary Report: RBA Report Co-design Session (2026)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) partnered with North Hartford Ascend (Ascend) to understand how service providers experience and use the Results-Based Accountability (RBA[1]) report template adapted by the University of Hartford Center for Social Research (CSR). Service providers across the Ascend network will be the primary users of the RBA report template, which creates an opportunity to bring their perspectives into the design of a tool. The RBA template is intended to support ongoing reflection, learning, and continuous improvement across the Ascend network.

During an Ascend Service Provider Meeting in August, 19 participants were introduced to the RBA template and shared feedback on the tools' strengths, areas for improvement, and how the RBA report could be made more relevant and useful to their work. Participants described the report as organized, visually appealing, and helpful for understanding program information. They also identified opportunities to make the report easier to interpret and more useful for communicating impact. Key recommendations included simplifying visuals, using everyday language, adding context to help readers interpret the data,

[1] RBA is a framework developed by Mark Friedman and serves as a disciplined decision-making and planning framework that starts with desired end results and works backward to determine the actions needed to achieve them. It is widely used by governments, non-profits, and communities worldwide to move from talking about complex social problems to taking measurable action.

and creating more opportunities to represent impact through both quantitative and qualitative information.

A central theme that emerged across breakout groups was the need to balance consistency across the framework for Ascend while incorporating the requirements of individual programs. Participants recognized the value of having a common framework while also noting that programs differ in the populations they serve, how services are delivered, where services are offered, and how they define and measure success. Service providers recommended allowing programs to incorporate indicators of success and information that are meaningful to their work, while also creating space for stories, testimonials, photos, and other qualitative information that can help explain impact.

The feedback also prompted a broader question about how the RBA report should be positioned within the Ascend system. Participants saw an opportunity for the report to be a practical tool for communicating impact, identifying areas for improvement, understanding resource and capacity-building needs, and connecting with the community.

Ultimately, the findings from the co-design session provide recommendations for strengthening the RBA template and clarifying its purpose. The recommendations will not simply help to make the report easier to complete or read, but will ensure that it provides meaningful value to the programs sharing their data and to Ascend as a network using that information for learning, improvement, and collective action.

NEXT STEPS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations will be shared with the Center for Social Research at the University of Hartford.

1. **Improve the clarity, accessibility, and interpretability of the RBA report.** Redesign the report to make information easier for service providers to navigate, understand, and interpret. Use plain language, descriptive headings, clearly defined terminology, and accessible data visualizations to help providers move beyond reviewing data to understanding what it means for their programs. A more accessible and interpretable report will help providers better understand their data, identify trends, and translate findings into meaningful insights about program performance and impact.

2. **Develop a flexible reporting framework that reflects diverse program models and system-level impact.** The reporting structure should recognize that programs differ in their populations, services, delivery models, geographic reach, and intended outcomes. A more flexible framework will ensure that partners can demonstrate the value of their work without being limited by a one-size-fits-all reporting structure. Actionable next steps include:
    a. Develop a core set of standardized RBA indicators that provide consistency across partners.
    b. Allow providers to select or add program-specific indicators that align with their goals, populations served, and service models.
    c. Ensure the framework accommodates different types of partners, including multi-site programs, arts and recreation programs, and system-level organizations such as Hartford Public Library.
    d. Adapt reporting expectations and data visualizations from partners to capture both program-level outcomes and broader systems-level contributions.

3. **Integrate qualitative insights and stories to provide a more complete picture of impact.** Expand the report beyond quantitative measures to incorporate stories, experiences, and other qualitative evidence that help illustrate the impact of programs. Recognize that numbers alone may not fully capture program effectiveness, participant experiences, or the broader contributions of community partners. Combining quantitative and qualitative information will create a more comprehensive understanding of program impact and help communicate the value of work that may otherwise be difficult to measure. Actionable next steps include:
    a. Introduce a "Story Behind the Data" section where providers can share participant or family experiences, testimonials, photos, and examples of meaningful outcomes.
    b. Allow providers to highlight successful connections, referrals, and other changes that may not be reflected in traditional performance measures.
    c. Provide flexibility for programs to submit qualitative information when quantitative data is limited or not applicable.
    d. Encourage providers to include brief context that helps explain the significance of reported outcomes.

4. **Position the RBA report as a tool for continuous improvement, collaboration, and capacity building.** Position the report as more than an accountability or reporting requirement. Use it as a resource to support provider learning, program improvement, strategic decision-making, resource development, and stronger connections across the community. Repositioning the report as a practical learning and planning tool can increase its value to providers, strengthen organizational capacity, and create opportunities to translate data into action, collaboration, and additional resources. Actionable next steps include:
    a. Engage providers to better understand how they can use the report to inform program planning, improvement, and decision-making.
    b. Incorporate a "What Can We Do Next?" section to help providers identify opportunities for improvement, resource gaps, capacity-building needs, and potential areas for collaboration.
    c. Highlight opportunities to connect providers with Ascend, other community partners, and relevant resources.
    d. Include links or QR codes to data literacy, data collection, and data infrastructure resources to strengthen providers' ability to collect, interpret, and apply data.
    e. Explore opportunities to use report findings to inform fundraising, resource alignment, and broader community investment strategies.

CHILDHOOD PROSPERITY LAB

The Lab advances social innovations that support the optimal health, development, and well-being of children, families, and communities where they live, learn, work, play, and pray. Collaboration is key to our work. We partner with practitioners, service providers, families, and changemakers across Connecticut and beyond to improve outcomes. Our multidisciplinary team at Connecticut Children's brings expertise in family sciences, child development, public health, and more to drive impactful change. Three core components serve as the foundation for our unique approach:

- Co-designing solutions in partnership with children, families, and communities using human-centered design approaches and methodologies;
- Strengthening family and community protective factors; and
- Advancing systems change to help children and families thrive in all areas of life.

NORTH HARTFORD ASCEND

Ascend is a prenatal-to-career initiative to ensure children living in the North Hartford Promise Zone – which includes the Clay Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany neighborhoods – have the support they need to thrive. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhood Grant Program, Ascend brings together community residents, leaders, community-based organizations, and other cross-sector partners to identify and address community priorities and improve academic, health, and quality of life outcomes for children and families.

What is Human Centered Design (HCD)?

The Lab defines Human Centered Design (HCD) as a methodological framework for centering the needs, goals, and perspectives of children, families, communities and other key stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social innovations. The Lab team are certified practitioners of 36 methods that comprise the LUMA system, a framework of the LUMA Institute. The Lab serves as a resource for internal and external partners as they coordinate opportunities to elevate community voice and perspectives through co-design.

Why Co-design the RBA Template with Service Providers ?

Service providers will be the primary users of the RBA report. Gathering inputs from service providers across the North Hartford Ascend system through co-design will help ensure the template is:

- Accessible and intuitive
- Supportive of storytelling and impact communication
- Useful for learning and continuous quality improvement

ABOUT THE SESSION

A total of 19 service providers participated in the session on August 27th, 2026. The session took place at Parker Memorial Community Center during the monthly Ascend Service Provider Meeting. The session began with an introduction to Ascend, CSR, and the Lab, followed by an overview of the RBA template. Participants then engaged in structured HCD activities facilitated by the Lab..

The following were the goals for the session:

1. Understand how providers interpret the RBA template by identifying strengths, pain points, and opportunities.
2. Gather feedback on design, clarity, and usability.
3. Ensure the final template supports shared learning across Ascend.

The facilitators used the following HCD method:

HCD Method	Definition	Purpose
Rose Thorn Bud	A technique for identifying things as positive, negative or having potential.	To gather participant feedback on what is working well for the RBA report, what could be improved, and what opportunities exist for future development.

FINDINGS FROM THE CO-DESIGN SESSION

Key Insights from Activity:

Strengths of the RBA Template	
Emerging Themes	**Summary of Participant responses**
Overall, formatting of the RBA template inclusive of its visual design supports engagement and understanding or lack thereof	Participants appreciated the level of organization throughout the report and noted that the distinct sections helped them to understand different types of information. The structure also enabled participants to seamlessly flow through sections from one to the next. Participants described the graphics, colors, and overall presentation as engaging, polished, and professional. The visual design helped make the information approachable and supported readers in navigating the report.

Strengths of the RBA Template	
Charts to organize data provides an accessible entry point for the user	Participants agreed that the graphs were generally easy to understand and that the opening page provided a helpful overview. This suggests that the existing visual approach can support readers who may not regularly work with data.
A clear explanation of the RBA approach provides useful context for service providers using the framework for the first time	Participants valued the overview of the RBA purpose and approach, particularly because it helped orient readers who were unfamiliar with the framework to the information being presented.
Elevate the value of the RBA template as a tool for learning and reflecting, which strengthens programs	Participants recognized that the RBA template can support ongoing reflection and learning, creating an opportunity for providers to examine their data, identify patterns, and consider areas for improvement.

Opportunities for Improvement	
Emerging Themes	**Summary of Participant Responses**
Consider including data visualizations that appropriately reflect the information/data that organizations collect	Participants noted that not all program data needs to be presented as graphs and that placing multiple charts on one page can make the information feel condensed or difficult to interpret. They also questioned whether line charts are the most appropriate format for all types of data. Participants suggested using the type of visual that best communicates the information and reducing the number of visuals presented on a single page.
More context is needed to help readers interpret the data	Participants are looking for more information to help understand what the data means and why trends may have changed over time, such as changes in enrollment or referrals. They also identified a need for clearer definitions of key terms and more descriptive headings or explanations to help readers interpret the information in context.
The template needs a flexible, yet structured approach to reflect different program models	Participants noted that some programs do not track measures such as “program completion,” given their scope of work and target audience. For example, arts and recreational programs may use different indicators to demonstrate success. Participants also highlighted the need for programs operating across multiple sites to

Opportunities for Improvement	
	report location-specific information when relevant.
Reduce visual overload in the report	Participants elevated that a logo on every page overcrowds the report and detracts from the most important information. They also noted that some visuals were difficult to understand at first glance without additional context. These reflections suggest a need to balance consistent branding with content that prioritizes understanding.
The template does not yet fully capture broader system-level impact	Service providers from local libraries and city-wide or broader community services noted that the current template does not always reflect the scale or nature of their work. Programs operating across multiple locations or at a broader system level may need support with articulating their reach and impact beyond a single program or site.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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