

Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation: Using Evaluation to Improve Decision Making

Since being appointed Vice President for Strategic Planning and Evaluation at the Arthur Blank Family Foundation, John Bare has worked to embed evaluation into all aspects of the Foundation's work. Bare set out to improve the quality of information the Foundation uses to make decisions and to more fully embed learning and evaluation into the daily activities of the Foundation. As Bare states, *"If you can make better decisions, you'll get better results. My job is to give you the tools and resources to make better decisions and get better results."* Over the last three years, the Blank Family Foundation has undertaken several evaluation actions which have led to improved decision making.

In August 2005, in partnership with the Atlanta Falcons Youth Foundation, the Blank Family Foundation launched the Fitness Zone Project, aimed at combating youth obesity in targeted Atlanta neighborhoods by promoting and providing increased physical activities for youth. Each zone was based in a neighborhood in Atlanta, with multiple sites where youths could participate in various physical activities. Throughout the initiative, the Foundation convened the five grantees around an agenda that the grantees themselves had established. These sessions are designed to address common challenges and to identify best practices that may have existed at one site and which could then be transferred to other sites. These sessions also keep the Foundation aware of grantee progress, and help the Foundation identify ways in which it can better support its grantees from week to week.

"It may sound unimpressive, it may sound like common sense," Bare says of the meetings every five weeks, *"But you can never have problems that are more than five weeks old because there's always a new meeting."* This type of real-time problem solving is a departure from more stagnant evaluation that only examines outcomes after a significant amount of time has elapsed. *"You don't wait for someone to tell you a year later in an evaluation report what is going differently from your plan; you make adjustments to create better performance as soon as you realize there is an issue."*



As a result of the frequent grantee learning circles, the Foundation recently responded to grantee needs concerning something very practical: the need for a Web-based reporting system. Since grantees were all operating different IT systems, a Web-based approach made the most sense for a formal reporting mechanism. Grantees have also provided assistance to other grantees at these meetings, for example, by providing strategies around how to increase participation and offering follow-up assistance after the meetings. *"We work to create a cultural norm where grantees tell us and each other what's working and, more importantly, what isn't. We want to know these things not to punish them, but so we can fix it."*

Another evaluation tool that the Blank Foundation has used to improve decision making and better plan its work has been GIS mapping. *"Depicting social conditions on maps, instead of tables or narratives is an unbelievably effective way to engage people,"* Bare commented. By mapping publicly available data against the specific neighborhoods in which it invests, the Foundation is better able to assess whether its targeted neighborhoods are, in fact, the highest need areas. This helps the Foundation to better plan its work and allows the Foundation to access information relevant for selecting geographic focus areas for interventions. It also provides the added benefit of keeping the Foundation aware of the most pressing community needs in a data-driven way.

Having clear and measurable goals in several programmatic focus areas has enabled the Foundation to utilize the mapping of publicly available data most effectively. For example, through its Better Beginnings initiative, the Foundation seeks a healthy start for children through age five. To work toward this broader goal, the Foundation has established several more precise goals, such as reducing the number of sustained cases of abuse and neglect in Atlanta and increasing the participation of disadvantaged children ages 0 to 5 in early learning experiences. State and county data can be used to measure progress against these goals.

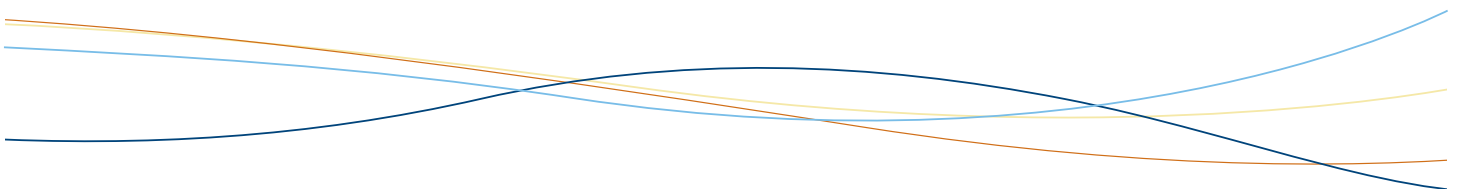
By cutting the data down to the neighborhood level, the Foundation is able to learn valuable information about where it is progressing toward its goals and where more resources are needed. *"You can't look at macro data for micro interventions,"* Bare explains. *"If we can find locations where certain social situations are present, we can better design interventions to correct them."* Bare acknowledges that it is important to consider both the possibilities and limitations around using publicly available data, especially when the data covers a wider geographic area than the Foundation's relatively small investments.

"We don't think we can move the overall abuse and neglect rate in the whole county. We're working with families with children aged zero to five in, say, South Atlanta, so already we have cut the population right there." Bare also reminds us that if macro-level data is to be considered, it is important to ensure some cohesion or strategy behind the micro-level investments. *"If you just have a bunch of grants that aren't aligned, then all you need is grant-level evaluation. But if you have grants that are all pulling in the same direction, you can begin to ask, 'What is our impact on the larger social issue?'"*

While Bare acknowledges that the Foundation still has much work to do to fully embed evaluation and learning into all aspects of Foundation decision making, the Blank Family Foundation has clearly adopted an approach to evaluation that is aimed at providing decision makers with better and more frequent information that enables them to make more informed and practical decisions. *"When you use feedback well in evaluation, people don't even realize it because it's so embedded into everything you do. Evaluation should be embedded into the work and help you do it better."*

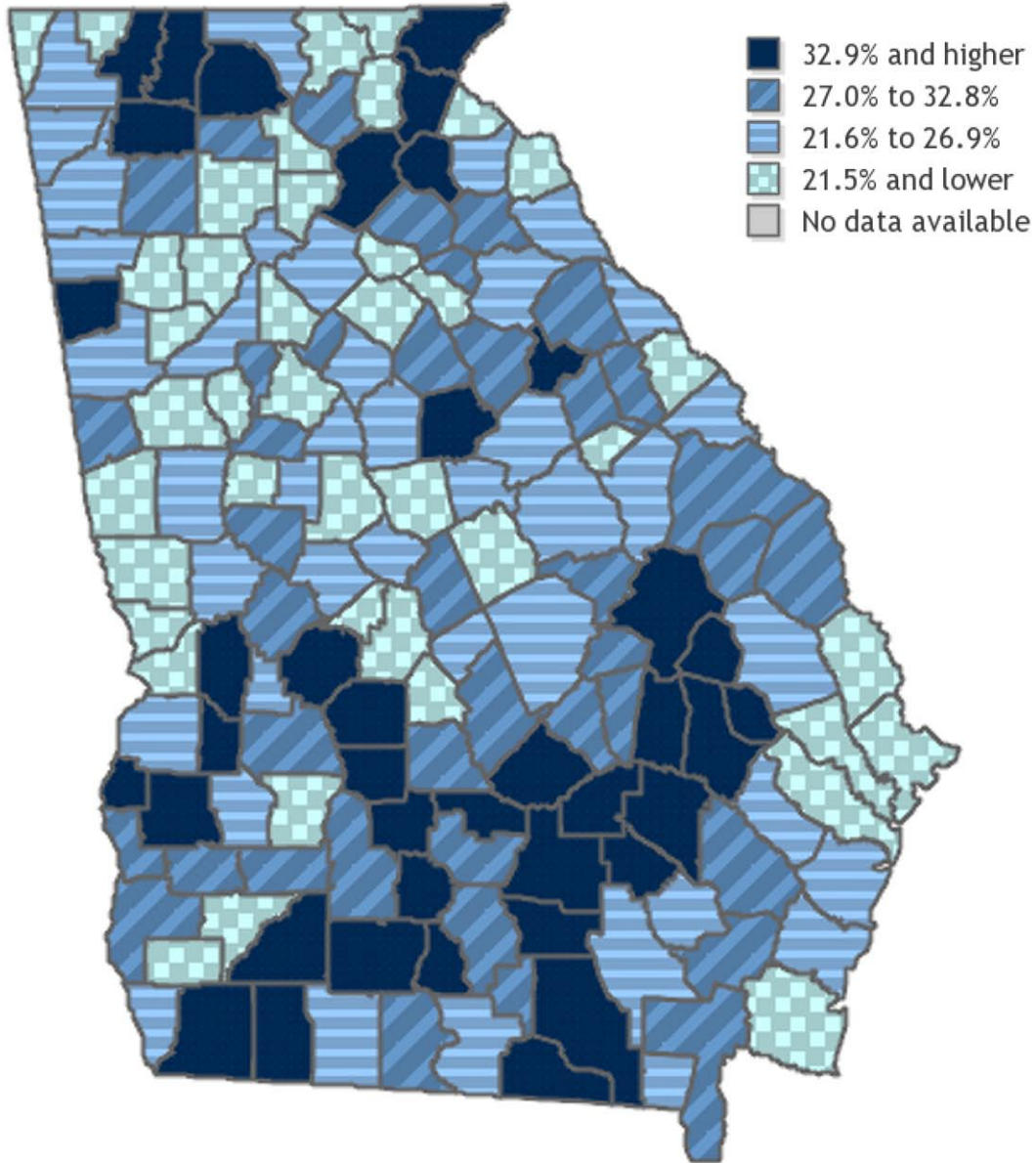
Arthur Blank Family Foundation

- \$34 million in assets as of 2005
- Based and fund primarily in Atlanta, GA
- Focus on improving opportunities for low-income youth, increasing public parks in Atlanta, and supporting the arts
- \$16 million in grants in 2005
- Number of staff: 10
- Evaluation Staff: Yes



Georgia Counties

Babies born to mothers with less than 12 years of education (percent), 2004



Source: Georgia Kids Count