

Restacking the Odds where children live, learn and play

Place-based Impact Summit 2026



RESTACKING
THE ODDS



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country across Australia.

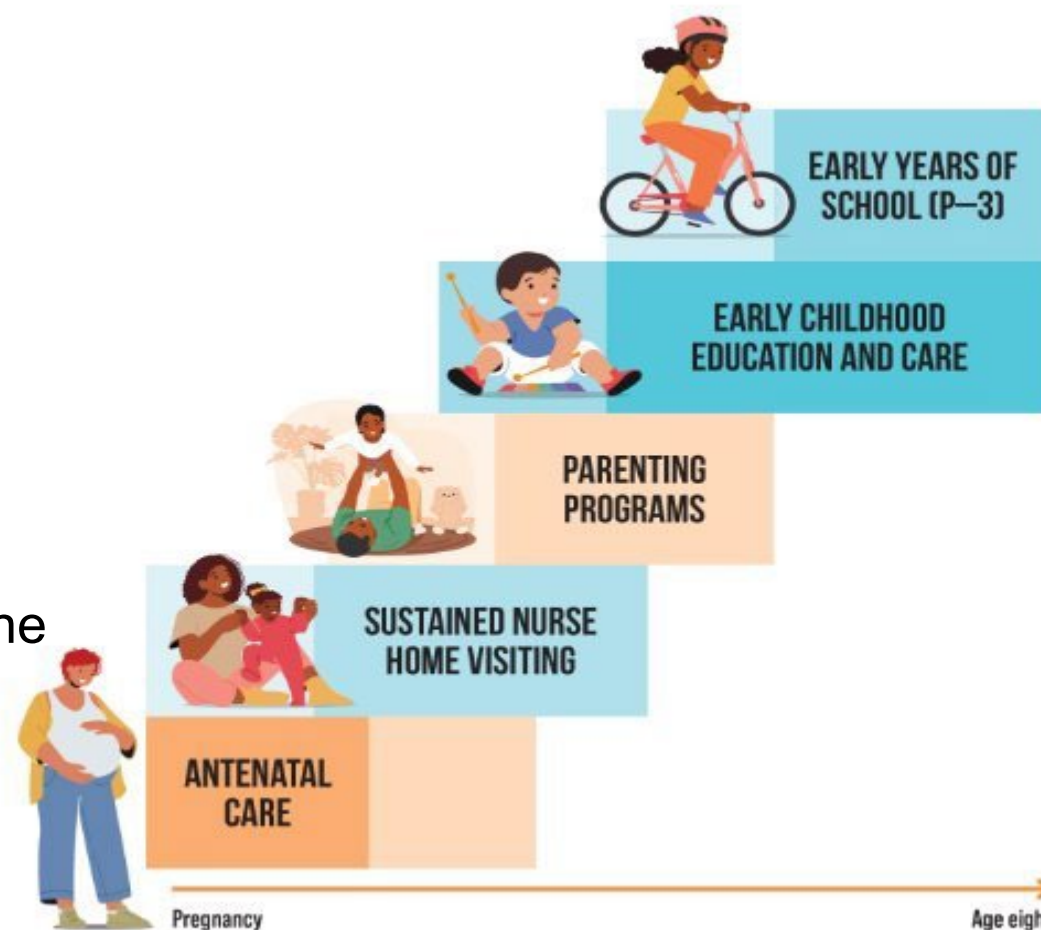
RSTO has the privilege to work on: the lands of the Noongar Nation in Armadale West and Central Great Southern; on Goreng Country in Katanning; with the people of the Warrwa, Bardi, Jawi, Ngarinyin, Worrorra, Nyikina, Mangala, Unggumi, Bunuba, Walmajarri, Kija, Gooniyandi, Oogardang, Oomeday, Yow Jabi and Wangkatjunka Nations in the Derby Community; and on the lands of the Karajarri people, which is also home to Juwalliny, Mangala, Nyungumarta, and Yulpartja language groups, in Bidyadanga. We also work on the lands of the Ngemba (Ngiyaampa) people in Bourke, New South Wales, which also encompasses the traditional Country of the Baakindji (Barkandji), Murrawarri and Kunya peoples; on the lands of the Bailai, Gurang, Gooreng Gooreng and Taribelang Bunda peoples — the Port Curtis Coral Coast peoples — in Gladstone, Queensland; on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong peoples of the Kulin Nation in Melbourne, Victoria; on the lands of the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji, Yidinji and Yirrganydji peoples, and the eleven distinct Traditional Custodian groups of the Cairns region, Queensland; on the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung (Djaara) people in Maryborough, Victoria; and on the lands of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains in Adelaide, South Australia.

We recognise Aboriginal peoples continuing connection to culture, lands, families and communities and their vital contributions to supporting children to thrive. We pay our respects to Aboriginal cultures and to Elders past and present.

The early years are where trajectories are set — and where the system most often falls short.

- Over 80% of place-based initiatives focus on the early years — we know a child's trajectory is shaped before they start school.
- Services and programs exist in our communities. BUT families and children who need them most still aren't consistently reached.
- No single service determines outcomes. It's the combination — the stack — at the right time in, the right way.

So why isn't the stack working in our communities?



The problem – we measure for accountability not for learning

How we measure now

- Upwards - accountability focus
- Long-term outcomes only
- Reported years after the fact
- Aggregated — can't act locally

"Can't decide where to act and how to know if its working?"

What learning and improvement requires

- Early signals close to practice
- Real-time or near real-time
- Local enough to act on
- Improvement and decision focus

"We know we have a problem. We just don't know what to do on Monday."

Three innovations in how we work

01

Decision-driven data

Start with the decision the community want to make.
Work backwards to the data.

02

Library of lead indicators

Choose indicators close to practice. Evidence informed and fast enough to see change, consistent enough to share learning.

03

Test and learn capability

Supporting to use information to adjust what you do. Continuously, locally, in practice.

What to measure?

How to measure?

What to do next?

Measurement as a learning system

1. Decision driven data - start with the decision not the dataset

Story 1 – Community Team

They knew families weren't showing up. They didn't know why or where to start.

Decision frame: where do we act to improve participation?

Service data — enrolment, attendance — showed families were enrolling but not coming. That told them the problem wasn't access.

Family Voice - so they asked families and practitioners directly.

The answer: families didn't trust the service enough to come back.

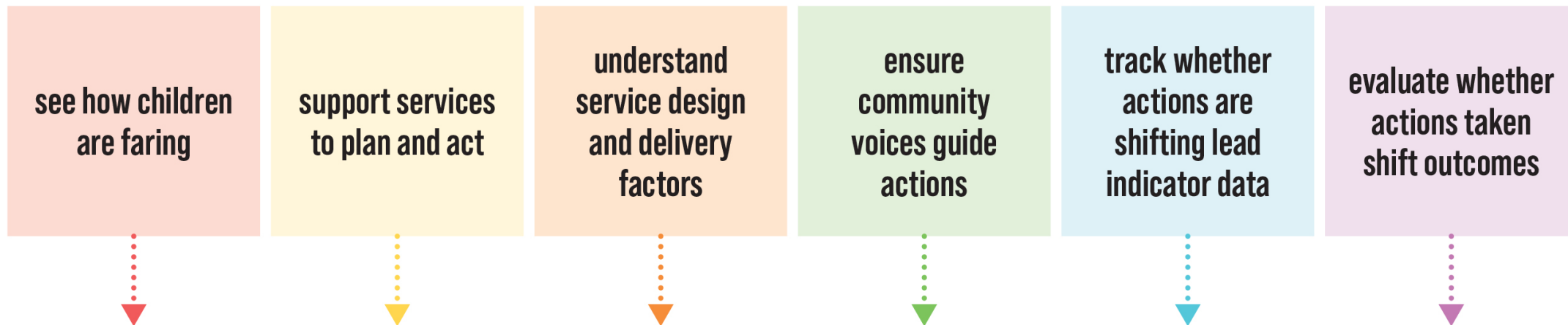
What did they do? they stopped waiting for families to come to them and did more outreach.

Start with decision. Work backwards to the data. Targeted response.



Decision framework

IF WE WANT TO...



THEN WE NEED...



**LAG
DATA**



**LEAD INDICATOR
DATA**



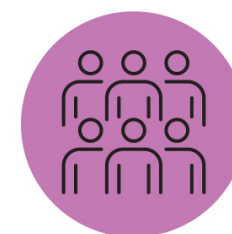
**LOCAL CONTEXT
DATA**



**EXPERIENCE
DATA**



**IMPROVEMENT
DATA**



**IMPACT
DATA**

2. Lead indicators library - evidence informed, not assumed

✓ Evidence-based

Each indicator has a known association with a long-term child outcome, grounded in published or practice evidence.

✓ Community choice

Communities select which indicators fit their local priorities — the library provides options, not prescriptions

✓ Consistent over time

Standardised definitions enable comparisons across communities and tracking of trends at a system level

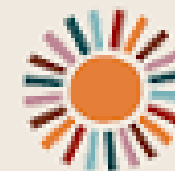
EXAMPLE INDICATOR

Lead indicator	Pathway to outcome	Long-term outcome	Evidence
Supported Playgroup participation Children and parents attending 80% sessions	Parent-child interaction — quality, peer socialisation, connection to services	Social competence and — successful transition to school	<i>Sims et al.; Communities for Children evidence base</i>

What this looks like in practice – evidence-informed indicators. Communities choose what fits.

Story 2: The Early Years Partnership, WA

- Four communities. One shared goal: school readiness and wellbeing.
- Different contexts. Locally developed action plans.
- Focus on changing outcomes - can't wait years to know if it's working
- Lead indicators give each community a way to track progress now and course correct along the way
- Each partnership selects what matters most to them — locally owned



EARLY YEARS
PARTNERSHIP

The measures are locally owned, but consistent enough across sites that we can start to see patterns, learn together and understand what might be scaled.

3. None of this works without capability to act on it: improvement platform and support

DYNAMIC TEST AND LEARN PLATFORM

Indicators aligned to activities and outcomes

All data visualisations, plans and progress in one platform

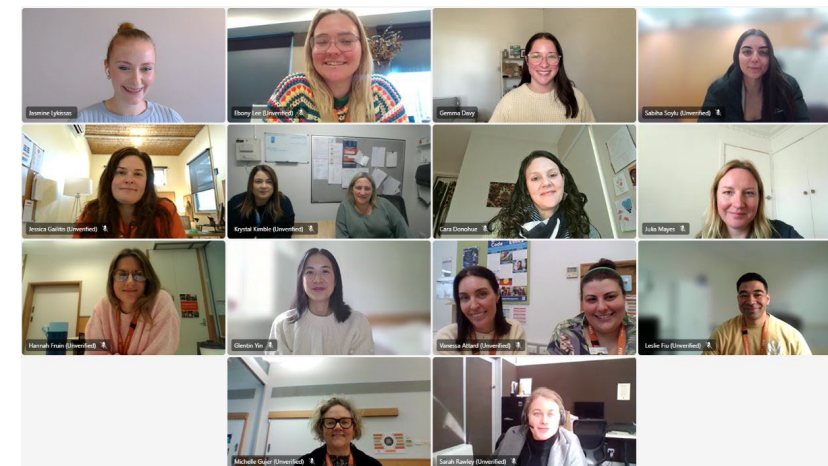
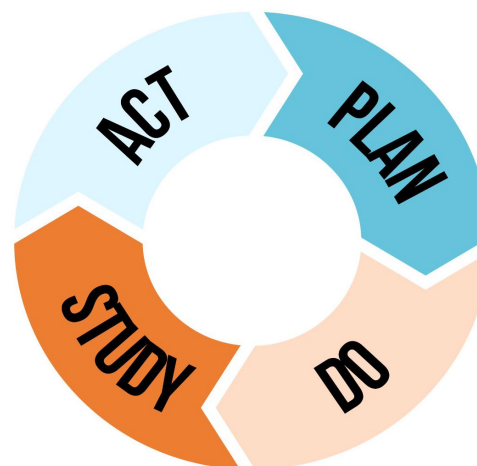
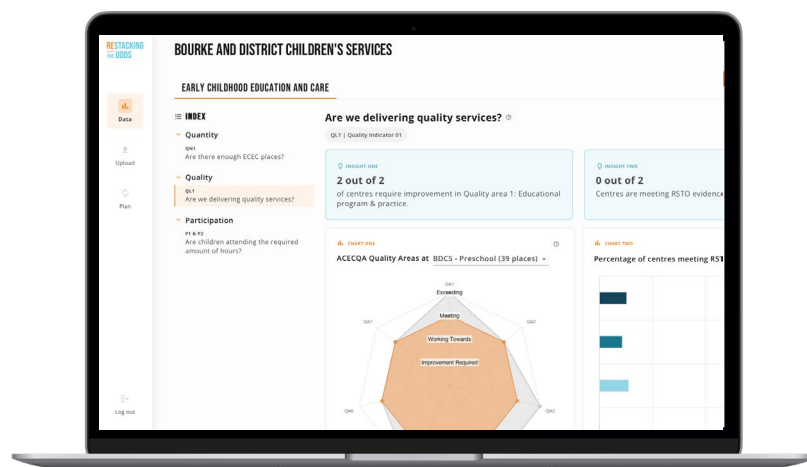
Tools to support continuous improvement using lead indicators

LOCALLY LED SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

Local improvement leadership capability building

Regularly come together in structured test and learn cycles

Sharing learning across partnerships and communities



Four things makes this work

Clear equity goals

Locally led, focused on who's missing out

Multidisciplinary teams

Policy, practice, data, and community — working together, not in silos

Tools that close the loop

Focus on the right decisions, right data and that allow test, learn, adapt, repeat — not just plan and report

Local leadership

People who champion and embed this way of working, with capability built over time

This is not just a measurement innovation. It's a system capability for learning and improvement.

What this means for the sector

1. Measure for learning, not just accountability

Fast-moving lead indicators — close to practice, actionable locally — are the infrastructure scalable impact needs. Outcomes data alone tells you what you feared, too late to act.

2. Scale the learning, not just the solution

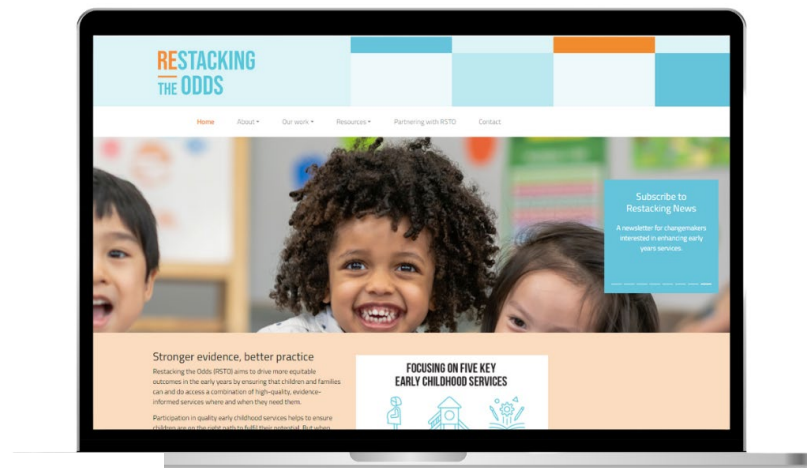
What works in one community can inform what works in another — if we build systems that capture and share that learning. Scale and local adaptation are not in tension; they need each other.

3. Invest in capability, not just frameworks

The impact doesn't come from the tool. It comes from local leaders who know how to use it — and cultures that make continuous learning the norm, not the exception.

The system can work differently to help all children thrive

Where to find out more



For publications, toolkits
and policy briefs,
head to our website
www.rsto.org.au

Stay up-to-date with new resources by
subscribing to our newsletter.

