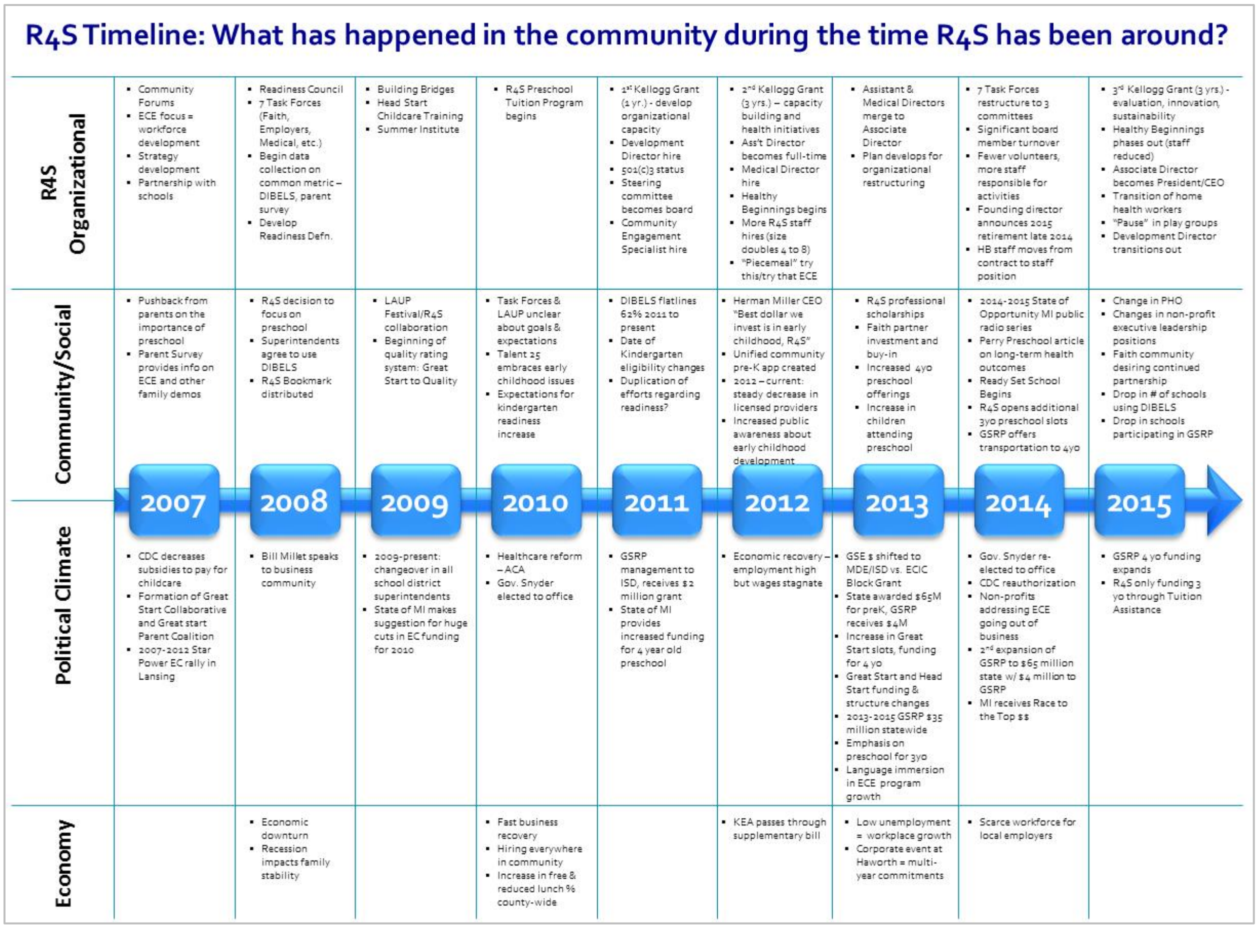
GUIDE TO TIMELINE MAPPING

Example Timeline Map[1]



OVERVIEW OF TIMELINE MAPPING

What is timeline mapping?

Timeline mapping is the process of arranging important events, activities, grants, actions, achievements, and other milestone markers in chronological order, enabling insight into their relationships to one another and to key contextual factors (e.g., social, economic, political, demographic, and cultural events and trends).

[1] Slide included as part of the Phase 1 Activity Highlights Report for Ready for School's Strategic Review.

How can timeline mapping support systems thinking and practice?	
✓ Context	• Understand an issue's landscape/context and history. • Identify how contextual factors influence a topic/goal. • Put a group's progress/challenges in context (e.g., relative to external factors, key activities, and funding levels).
✓ Connections	• Explore the relationship between the group's activities or achievements and other actors' activities or achievements.
✓ Patterns	• Determine where the energy is in the system and where there are gaps or blockages. • Understand the group's role or focus and how this has shifted over time. • Explore how the focus of other actors (or the larger system in general) has shifted over time. • Visualize momentum, traction, and trends over time. • Understand how policies, structure, or social and cultural norms are changing. • Understand the relationship between outputs/outcomes and external events.

TIMELINE MAPPING, PART ONE: FEASIBILITY ASSESSMENT

1. Is timeline mapping right for your project?

Considerations	Use Ecocycle Mapping	Don't Use Ecocycle Mapping
Time orientation	✓ Retrospective: You want to look back over a *specific period.*	x Present/prospective: You want to understand what is happening now or what might happen in the future.
Credible informants	✓ Participants can credibly verify, add to, or refute information that will populate the timeline.	x You do not have access to credible sources that can confirm or refute information on the timeline.

2. What do I need to properly facilitate a timeline mapping session?

A timeline mapping session typically takes about 90 minutes to facilitate. Preparation requirements are outlined below.

	Description
Participant prep time	Minimal (review draft timeline, if made available)
Facilitator prep time	6–12 hours
Facilitator prep work	Setup for the activity • Determine the timeframe for the mapping activity. • Set the boundaries for the mapping ("what's in and what's out"). Prepopulate template • Use existing data (grant reports, strategy documents, evaluation

	reports, other publications, interviews) to prepopulate timeline mapping template. • Add contextual data as appropriate (e.g., enactment of key policies).
Required materials	• Facilitation agenda and talking points • Individual printed copies of the prepopulated timeline so that people can reference it during the session • Large printed posters (24 by 36 inches) with dates for the timeline and key pieces of information or thematic areas identified • Sticky notes for adding or moving information on the timeline • Markers, pens • Flip charts (at least two) and wall space for hanging flip chart paper on wall (eight sheets long ideally)

TIMELINE MAPPING, PART TWO: PREP

Unlike most other types of visualization tools, timeline mapping often requires significant pre-meeting work to be successful. (This is especially true if key inputs, such as grants data, need to be retrieved and analyzed before they can be added to the template.) Below are the recommended steps in preparing for a timeline mapping session.

1. Choose a Topic and Set Boundaries

- Select a **topic** for the analysis and set topical boundaries. For example, a chosen topic could be "progress toward early childhood care objectives" in a particular county, with "early childhood" defined as birth to age eight and loose boundaries around the social determinants of health.
- Determine **who will participate** in the timeline mapping session, and whose activities, strategies, and investments will be included as part of the mapping exercise.
- Select a **scale of analysis** (e.g., national, state, regional, or local). In general, the broader the topic selected (above), the smaller the scale of analysis should be. Your map should stick to no more than three to four "levels" of analysis (e.g., program, organization, and context).
- Set a **timeframe for the analysis** to capture relevant history. For most topics, a 5- to 10-year retrospective timeline will suffice.

2. Create the Template

Working from the sample templates at the end of this section, create a two (or more) page template that session participants can use to populate the timeline. Follow the steps below to create the template. Refer to the Appendix for an example.

Creating the Template, Step 1: Prepopulate Data on a Timeline Document

The timeline map records the factual information that session participants will use to reveal connections among relevant data points (e.g., trends in policy or funding; participant events, strategies, or investments; specific efforts relevant to the subject of the timeline). To the extent that this factual information is available in advance of the mapping session, you should incorporate it into a template that includes timeframe, key external trends and events, high-level participant and partner outputs and activities, and participant and partner investments. (Factual information could come from a number of sources, such as grant reports, evaluation reports, the media, academic research, subject matter experts, and many others).

A. Timeframe

At the top of the page, mark the timeframe and identify period markers as appropriate (e.g., months, years, and decades). As a rule of thumb, aim for about 10 period markers per page to ensure there is adequate space for details and comments.

B. Internal activities and events

Provide space to record data on participants' (and partners', if desired) strategic focus, activities, achievements, and leadership/internal transitions. For example, you may wish to include data on:

- Major initiatives or focus areas during the timeframe (e.g., RFP announced, sites selected, conference hosted or attended, partnerships established)
- Changes in vision, mission, or core strategies
- Changes in organizational leadership (e.g., date that a new executive director joined)

Optional: Major Investments
To the extent that they are relevant, create space to record major investments by participants and partners. In many instances, there will be more grants and investments relevant to a topic than can be feasibly depicted on a timeline. In such instances, it is important to define and apply criteria to narrow the list. • Define and Apply Criteria: Decide what criteria would be ideal to apply to the data (e.g., magnitude or significance of the effort, scale or location of the effort, targeted population, program or portfolio). Decide how the data would ideally be sorted (i.e., how the data will be organized and in what order the criteria will be applied). • Gather the Data: Obtain data from relevant and credible sources. • Plot the Data – Consider developing a color-coding system for information related to different sub-topics (e.g., for a map focused on early childhood, blue could indicate infancy, purple could indicate nursery school, red could indicate pre-school). – Plot the data in the relevant spaces on the timeline template. You may need to adjust the template or the dataset to accommodate the information you've gathered. It is okay to adjust the number of years on each page and the size of the efforts included in the dataset. – After the data is plotted, check it for accuracy. Consider running the draft by two or three key members of the participant group before sharing it with the full group.

C. External events

Next, provide space to record key external factors (e.g., public policies, funding changes, and media coverage of key events). These factors are included in the timeline mapping process in order to prompt participants to consider how they responded to shifts in external context and energy regarding a given topic. In general, it is best to focus on external events with strong, meaningful connections to the subject of the timeframe. The below table provides guidance on external factors that could be considered as well as potential criteria to use in filtering information to be added to the template.

Categories of External Events to Consider
• Enactment of new policies or major shifts in existing policies • Major investments or divestments in the space *(could be public or philanthropic)* • Changes in organizational or political leadership • Major news stories, public events, or campaigns • New breakthroughs in technology or research • Changes in economic conditions • Changes in demographics **Remember that data on the map should be expressed in date format.** For example, rather than adding a trend such as "increased attention to childhood obesity issues," it is preferable to add specific dates or periods, such as the timing of a local media campaign on healthy eating, or the date that a new school food policy took effect, or the period when local policymakers considered that policy. **If needed, you can create different timeline pages to track the influence of different categories of external events.**

Creating the Template, Step 2: Develop Guiding Questions

The final step in the prep process for a timeline mapping session is to develop the guiding questions that will frame how participants review the information and what types of insights they generate. Questions will help participants move from the "what" to the "so what."

Good guiding questions will:

- Be open ended
- Progress from looking backward to looking forward; make connections between past events and future objectives
- Prompt participants to read between the data or make connections
- Think at the systems level

The following set of guiding questions can serve as a strong starting place and can be customized for the specific objectives of the conversation.

Sample Guiding Questions

The facilitator should adapt the questions below to correspond with the topic of discussion.

1. **What themes or insights did this timeline provide?**
   - What appear to be some particularly noteworthy events, activities, factors, actors, or organizations? What makes them noteworthy?
     - How have the initiative or members of the group responded to key changes in external context?
   - What relationships do you notice in the map? *(Tailor this question to different scales/segments of the map, e.g., participant efforts, external context)*
     - How have the initiative and its context influenced each other?
   - What findings will be most important to keep top-of-mind for future work?

2. **What questions or implications does this timeline raise for you?** (*You should tailor this question to the objectives of your meeting/engagement.)*

3. **What's not here that should be here? What's here that should not be here?**

Room Setup and Materials Needed

- Allocate 90 minutes to the session.
- Print poster-sized (24-by-36-inch) copies of key pages in the timeline (this can be done at Staples or FedEx). Hang the posters so that participants can visually reference the timeline during the conversation.
- Arrange the room so that each member of the group can see one another and the posters.
- Distribute a printed copy of the timeline to each person so they can reference it during the conversation.
- Have at least two flip charts, flip chart pads, and markers available, with window or white-board space available to hang up to eight flip chart sheets.
- Have sticky notes and pens available.

TIMELINE MAPPING, PART THREE: PRE-WORK FOR PARTICIPANTS

Ideally, you should have time to share the prepopulated timeline with session participants before the meeting. In your email to participants, provide an overview of the purpose of the session and a preview of how it will be useful. Encourage participants to review the template in advance and reflect on the guiding questions (above) as time permits.

TIMELINE MAPPING, PART FOUR: FACILITATION AND SUGGESTED TIMING

A timeline mapping session typically takes about 75–90 minutes to facilitate.

1. **Introduction (15 minutes)**
   - Begin by sharing a brief introduction to timeline mapping and the purpose of the activity.

2. **Facilitate the Discussion (30–50 minutes)**
   - Use the guiding questions you developed (see Part Two, above) to help frame the conversation. Select two to three questions that you want to be sure to ask directly; the other questions can be reserved as probe questions. See the box below for example primary questions, probe questions, and suggested time allocations.

Facilitate the Conversation *These questions should be the same as the guiding questions shared in the pre-read.*	
Discussion Questions	**Suggested Time**

1. **What themes or insights did this timeline provide?**
- What appear to be some particularly noteworthy events, activities, factors, actors, or organizations? What makes them noteworthy?
    ▪ How has the initiative or members of the group responded to key changes in external context?
- What relationships do you notice in the map? *(Tailor this question to different scales/segments of the map, e.g., participant efforts, external context.)*
    ▪ How have the initiative and its context influenced each other?
- What findings will be most important to keep top-of-mind for future work?
	30 minutes

2. **What questions or implications does this timeline raise** for you as it relates to where and how the group should prioritize its activities, investments, and relationship-building work moving forward?	*10 minutes*
3. **What's not here that should be here?** What's here that should not be here?	*10 minutes*

   - During the discussion, draw the group's attention to themes and insights they share, past examples of how the organization or initiative has emerged or adapted, and ways the group responded to or missed external shifts in the system. Invite the group to share stories that illustrate best practices or learning moments.
   - Record the group's comments and insights in the "observations" row of the timeline template.

3. **Close the Conversation (10–15 minutes)**
   - A strong conclusion to the conversation reinforces key insights and motivates the group to apply what they've learned to their work moving forward.
   - Refer to the flip chart notes to develop brief concluding remarks touching on the following topics:
     - Purpose of the activity and discussion.
     - Key insights and themes that surfaced during the discussion, including insights about the organization or initiative's past work as well as implications for the future.
     - Lingering questions that surfaced but were not answered. Propose next steps for addressing the lingering questions.
     - Guidance for how to carry this conversation forward into future work.

NEXT STEPS

At the conclusion of the timeline mapping session, consider providing participants with a clear overview of next steps. For example, you may wish to share:

- Information about whether or when participants will have another opportunity to work on the timeline (typically, additional iterations with the group will not be required, but they might be desirable in some situations);
- Information about who else may have an opportunity to view or edit the timeline;
- Plans regarding the final format of the timeline (for example, whether it will be converted to a PowerPoint slide and distributed);
- Plans regarding how the timeline will be used within the organization or initiative; and
- Information about whether the timeline will be made publicly available, and if so, to what end and with what audiences.

Consider revisiting and updating the timeline at least annually or around key decision-making or learning junctures. One approach might be to reflect on the timeline with members of the original stakeholder groups and new participants and discuss how the timeline has changed. Depending on the participants' depth of knowledge/immersion in the area, consider grounding these update timeline mapping sessions in a series of external interviews or light-touch secondary research.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The KS wiki toolkit: Timelines - Historical mapping. Tools and resources sourced from CGIAR.
- Putting Data in Context: Timelining for Evaluators. AEA Conference presentation, November 2015. See also handout here.
- Artineh Samkian and Joelle Greene on Graphic Timelines to Capture Qualitative Process Data. Blog post containing quick tips on AEA's website, January 2014.
- Visualizing Process: How to Create a Stakeholder-friendly Graphic Timeline of Process Data. AEA Conference presentation, November 2013.