



# Sara S. McGarraugh, M.P.P.

Director of Consulting, The Improve Group

Sara is an equity-focused evaluator who motivates clients to consider the ways evaluation can be a force for a more just world. Her passionate positivity brings energy to her relationships and drives her ability to think creatively with others while homing in on practical next steps. Outside of work, Sara loves connecting with people over food (she is always looking for new recipes) and negotiating with her spouse about where to travel next.

## Expertise

### Evaluation

Sara engages clients to think deeply and critically about how to design equitable evaluations with community at their heart. She leads projects with the perspective that her role is to provide evaluation expertise and create pathways for communities to contribute their lived expertise in ways that work for them. Sara is unafraid of asking critical questions, acknowledging tricky power dynamics, or raising issues that may otherwise fester under the surface of the evaluation. This helps Sara consider multiple and divergent perspectives in a fair way. She shows vulnerability by being transparent about where she is learning, helping to build trust and acknowledge that evaluation is a journey that people experience in different ways. Her commitment to equity shows up in relationships with those affected by an evaluation and creative approaches to achieving shared goals in the work.

### Consulting

Sara's project management expertise ensures she delivers projects on budget and on time, even when she is navigating complex and unknown systems with clients. Her clear and frequent communication skills help clients and partners trust the quality of her teams' work. She is skilled at supporting clients in considering the ways evaluation can help advance equity. Building relationships is important to Sara—she enjoys getting to know clients, partners, and the people they serve, cultivating authentic relationships that ensure project experiences are positive and everyone grows together. Sara is particularly skilled at acting as a negotiator among people affected by a project, bringing into and valuing different voices in the evaluation process.

### Facilitation

Sara is a skilled facilitator who designs processes to enable groups to achieve their objectives. She is attentive to group dynamics and draws from a variety of techniques such as Technology of Participation® and Art of Hosting to ensure inclusion of different learning and engagement styles. Sara is a confident public speaker and facilitator with groups of all sizes. Funnell and Rogers' "Purposeful Program Theory" influences her approach to facilitating clients to create theories of change; her diverse experiences facilitating this process also continually improve her approach. Sara is attentive to group dynamics and is skilled in facilitating people with different experiences and perspectives to create useful program tools.

### Early childhood care and education

Sara has deep leadership experience with The Improve Group's portfolio of early childhood education-related projects. She has supported state agencies and community organizations to understand how to better fulfill their missions around quality early childhood care and education. Sara's broad and deep professional experience—as well as her personal experience as a mom of two—gives her a holistic understanding of the system of early childhood care and education. Her experience includes evaluating federal Preschool Development Grants in two states, supporting an inclusive childcare pilot grant, and working with liaisons across communities to engage busy parents, guardians, and providers to understand what is important to them and what they need.

## Collective Impact facilitation, backbone support

Sara brings her combined expertise in evaluation, equity, and facilitation to Collective Impact models. Her deep understanding of how to apply the model framework to Collectives allows her to design tools that support evaluation of the Collective's work while also building the knowledge of the model among partners. She recognizes the dynamics at play in bringing diverse groups alongside the process and the challenges of navigating between organizations who all have their own practices.

## Professional Experience

**The Improve Group** | St. Paul, MN | **Director of Consulting** | 2023-present | Plan, direct, and provide coaching support on projects to make the most of information, navigate complexity, and ensure clients' investments of time and money lead to meaningful, sustained impact. Project experience includes:

Leading and co-facilitating a State of Minnesota Task Force of experts to develop policy recommendations for school finance supports for multi-lingual learners, low-income students, and Students of Color. Sara convened resources and facilitated the group, bringing them to recommendations and a complete report in 4 months.

Conducting a deep statewide community engagement effort to bring diverse [interest-holder input into the design of Minnesota's new Kindergarten Fall Assessment](#). Sara's leadership enabled the team to conduct 26 focus groups, in person and virtually, in two months. The team gathered input in four languages. The report provided the Minnesota Department of Education with insights to guide planning and implementation.

Leading a large team in conducting a fast-paced workload efficiency study for the State of South Dakota's child welfare system. Sara guided the team through reviewing existing data, conducting extensive primary data collection, and developing a comprehensive report with recommendations and rationale.

Leading a [culturally responsive and equity-focused evaluation](#) to monitor progress toward Minnesota's Preschool Development Grant goals, reveal opportunities for continuous improvement, and provide a structure to advance and share best practices for early childhood development.

Supporting the [Minnesota Youth in Transition Database](#), a longitudinal survey monitoring outcomes for young adults aging out of foster care. Based on past data from this survey, our state agency client designed a grant program specifically focused on increasing youths' permanent connections. In evaluating these grants, Sara and the team center youth and the ways they experience the systems affecting them.

Using a health equity frame and working with two partner organizations to evaluate the Colorado Health Foundation's Supporting Healthy Minds and Youth Resiliency initiative, which focuses on Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ Youth of Color.

Partnering with Dakota County and community organizations to support facilitation of a cross-agency community-led effort to create a county One Stop Shop Family Resource Center.

Supporting the Minnesota Department of Human Services to design and manage a grant to pilot a potential process for increasing inclusive child care. Sara and her team aligned grant management with evaluation practice, bringing in an advisory group to support reflection and learning of the pilot and make recommendations for future initiatives.

**The Improve Group** | St. Paul, MN | **Managing Consultant** | 2016-2023 | Led evaluation projects and phases.

**The Improve Group** | St. Paul, MN | **Associate Consultant** | 2012-2016 | Worked collaboratively with project team to execute activities.

**University of Minnesota – Twin Cities** | Minneapolis, MN | Teaching Assistant, Economics for Policy Planning and Analysis I & II | 2012-2013

**Bridges to Learning** | Minneapolis, MN | Programs and Administrative Manager | 2010-2012

**École Primaire et Maternelle Bilingue Nola** | Yaoundé, Cameroon | Head Administrator and Fundraiser | 2009-2010

## Education

Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota | Master of Public Policy

- Minor: Evaluation Studies
- Capstone project: “Evaluating family engagement strategies in social service programs”

University of Wisconsin – Madison | Bachelor of Arts in Political Science with minors in Global Cultures and African Studies

## Training

Technology of Participation® Facilitation Methods | Institute of Cultural Affairs in the U.S.A.

## Community Involvement

American Evaluation Association | Social Finance Topical Interest Group (TIG) Program Co-Chair | 2017-2025

Saint Paul Tennis Club | Board member, Vice President, President | 2019-2024

The Improve Group Cooperative | Board Chair | 2023-2025

Mankato State University | Women in Leadership Advisory Board member | 2023-2024

## Professional Affiliations

American Evaluation Association

Minnesota Evaluation Association

Minnesota International NGO Network