



Deeper Learning and Diffusion of Scaled Impact Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

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The goal of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Deeper Learning + Diffusion of Innovation and Scaled Impact Initiative (DL+D), launched in 2018, was to generate knowledge about how fundamental shifts in teaching and learning could be scaled within public school systems efficiently, expediently, and equitably. The foundation funded 10 research-practice partnerships (RPPs) to accelerate educational improvement and facilitate learning. The initiative Request for Proposals (RFP) defined an ambitious scaling goal: going from 15% to 80% of target users in 3 years. Hewlett extended this timeline for many of the RPPs, however, in part because the global COVID-19 pandemic emerged during the second full school year of the grant period, disrupting and delaying the work.

In early 2021, the foundation contracted with SRI Education to conduct a retrospective evaluation of the initiative. This report summarizes the progress the RPPs made and how the grant structures and supports facilitated or inhibited this progress. Lessons learned about scaling for equity are summarized in the accompanying brief, [*Scaling Deeper Learning for Equity: Lessons Learned from the Deeper Learning + Diffusion and Scaled Impact Initiative*](#).

Initiative Grantees

The 10 RPPs varied in the number of organizations involved and the extent to which they had a history of working together. Each RPP had to include a research partner and a school system, and some also included a technical assistance provider. The school system

partners ranged from large urban districts to a consortium of rural districts, although most RPPs involved a single large district.

The deeper learning practices selected also varied substantially across RPPs. Four RPPs worked to scale a version of project-based learning, while the other RPPs focused on building leadership capacity for change management, shifting mindsets as a strategy for instructional change, or improving accountability systems and measurement of deeper learning competencies. Some RPPs shifted strategies over the course of the initiative as they learned more about the district or adapted their work to address challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As with the focal practices, the RPPs varied in how they defined and attended to equity. These definitions ranged from co-design processes that were inclusive of student and teacher voice to having a whole-child focus. All four RPPs focused on scaling a version of project-based learning conceived of equity at least in part in terms of equitable spread.

Progress Scaling Deeper Learning

For all but a few RPPs, the DL+D initiative was marked by slow initial progress due to a variety of factors related to low district readiness and lack of understanding of district context. Although all four RPPs that scaled a specific instructional practice reported evidence of spread, the initiative resulted in limited systematic data on the depth of implementation or the impact on student outcomes.

- The **four RPPs that focused on scaling a version of project-based learning** were reasonably successful in spreading their instructional practice, meeting or approaching the 80% threshold set in the RFP.
- The other RPPs have mixed evidence of success. **Two of the four RPPs that aimed to build leadership capacity or change instruction by shifting educator mindsets** have some evidence of increasing teacher or leader capacity. Another provided evidence of increased teacher awareness of the program, but did not report on change in instructional practice. The final RPP in this group provided no data on spread.
- **One of the two RPPs targeting improved accountability or measurement** more than tripled the number of participating districts during the grant period, while the other RPP did not provide evidence of spread.

As with quality of implementation, very few RPPs reported on scaling progress specifically for students farthest from opportunity.



All RPPs created tools or resources related to their target deeper learning practices, and several RPPs contributed to the knowledge base related to deeper learning by disseminating research findings through journal articles, book chapters, and white papers. Several RPPs secured continued funding for the work or aligned district systems to support deeper learning practices, helping to ensure the practices will be sustained.

Grantee Feedback on Initiative Structures and Supports

The DL+D initiative had three features not typical of foundation initiatives: the initiative RFP set out an extremely ambitious scaling goal, the RFP required grantees to be structured as RPPs, and Hewlett supported the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to facilitate an initiative-wide learning community. The most common feedback on the initiative was that 3 years was an unrealistic timeframe for deep change in complex systems. Respondents liked engaging with ideas about scaling and educational transformation, but many noted that the 3-year timeline was too short given the scaling target, citing a variety of reasons:

- Several RPPs, particularly newly formed partnerships, lacked understanding of their local district context before starting the work.
- Some RPPs did not have the existing partnership foundation or “existence proof” of deeper learning practice on which to build.
- Making deep shifts to teaching and learning requires time.

Respondents valued the RPP structure, but the initiative's lack of focus on continuous improvement seemed like a missed opportunity to some. In terms of the initiative supports, practitioners appreciated the initiative learning community but thought its value was constrained by the diversity of grantees' goals and contexts.

Implications for Funders

The DL+D initiative was a short but ambitious undertaking to learn about how to equitably scale deeper learning. Our retrospective study of the initiative suggests several implications for funders seeking to scale change and optimize learning.

Fund a planning period to ensure understanding of local context.

Several RPPs were new partnerships, and the researchers and technical assistance providers did not always fully understand the district context in which they were trying to scale. For some, this lack of understanding resulted in a slow start to the work; others realized that their original plan was not going to work and ended up making fundamental shifts in strategy. Structuring funding to include an initial planning grant would enable partners to conduct a landscape scan or capacity assessment, including getting input from teachers, district-level staff, and community members. This planning period would help ensure that any change efforts are designed with an understanding of local needs and organizational challenges, allow partners to tailor their strategy to the power dynamics in the district, and provide time for partnership development.



Co-design timelines and goals with grantees

A planning grant would have the additional benefit of allowing grantees to develop their own, realistic timeline and success metrics with input from a broad range of stakeholders. In the DL+D initiative, many RPPs either found the 80% target for scaling to be unrealistic from the start or came to view it as unrealistic as they learned more about the reality of their partner districts. Grantees were relieved when the foundation was flexible in holding them to their original scaling target as the pandemic intensified, but some noted that this reprieve resulted in a lack of direction and accountability that a more realistic target could have provided. Co-designed success metrics that are revisited as the work unfolds can help motivate and focus change efforts.

Ensure commonality among grantees on at least one dimension to optimize learning

Making sense of progress across an initiative is challenging when the grantees differ on multiple dimensions, including goals, lead organization type (e.g., nonprofit technical assistance provider or university-based research center), school level (e.g., elementary or secondary), number of school district partners, and role positionality of the school district representatives (e.g., district superintendent versus head of a small department within a district). In DL+D, the grantee goals alone ranged from scaling project-based learning, to shifting educator mindsets, to improving accountability systems. This variation constrained the generalizable learning from the initiative. In addition, grantees found that diversity on so many dimensions reduced the usefulness of the facilitated learning community. For initiatives with common learning agendas, it may be beneficial to ensure commonality on at least one (if not more) dimension.

Consider the factors that make RPPs the right strategy

Through the DL+D initiative, Hewlett funded RPPs to facilitate learning about how to scale educational change quickly. RPPs, however, require a long-term investment to reap the benefits of partnership development and develop an authentic continuous improvement culture. Ultimately, the RPP structure is designed to accelerate improvement within school systems, not to provide systematic data across partnerships. Distilling learnings across grantees is best achieved with an initiative-level evaluation that includes common scaling or success measures. Ideally, this evaluation would begin when an initiative is launched to establish a theory of action, provide formative feedback, develop common metrics with input from grantees, and shape grantee reporting requirements.

The foundation has shifted strategies since funding the DL+D initiative; however, we believe these insights to be broadly applicable to future efforts to catalyze improvements to teaching and learning in schools and districts.



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