Shifting a system
The Reimagine Learning network and how to tackle persistent problems
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Introduction
Setting the stage for change

The problems we face as a society are outpacing our ability to solve them. Persistent problems do this crazy thing: They persist. They become more insidious, interdependent, and emergent. We can attempt to scale innovative solutions as fast as we can, but the problems scale faster still.

Fortunately, the collective capacity to address persistent problems is deepening in real and exciting ways. Digital technologies let us connect and collaborate in new ways, operationalizing technologies such as concept and geographic mapping, social network analysis, and system mapping. Let us see and intervene in whole systems, so we can work on the root problems, not just the symptoms. And then there are the continually advancing “human technologies” such as shared leadership approaches, smart facilitation of multistakeholder groups, and whole-systems strategic planning and mapping that support greater collaboration within and among groups.

What this all adds up to is a set of tools, processes, and mindset shifts that let us align a set of diverse actors around a shared understanding of a problem and then create a coordinated plan of attack: a practice called aligned action. This approach to social-problem solving is a powerful way to catalyze progress toward—or a shift in—persistent problems. What follows is one story of how that happened: How a group of leaders and their organizations coalesced behind a shared vision for change; how a set of funders experimented with pulled grantmaking to move from isolated to co-ordinated impact; and how this network worked together to align their action in service of a new approach to education rooted in a deep understanding of how students learn.

Over six years, this group aggregated and deployed $87 million in philanthropic capital to create teaching and learning environments that help unlock creativity and potential in all students, including those who have been historically underserved. The group helped build and scale organizational models that embed a focus on both social-emotional learning and learner diversity, ultimately funding 93 organizations who collectively serve 7 million students nationwide. A network that launched with a core group of 50 founding members grew to more than 300 members representing a cross-section of the education ecosystem, who through knowledge-sharing and over 300 formal collaborations helped to seed the idea of how to reimagine learning to provide for the diverse needs of our students.

The network also helped integrate these ideas into the fabric of our education system through collective advocacy that resulted in helping to shape federal policy such as the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act and in advancing priorities at the state level, to set the systems and conditions to re-envision learning in the nation’s 14,000 school districts. From place-based work in a set of districts to engaging with key members of Congress and at the US Department of Education, this effort showed that large-scale systemic change can happen when held leaders join together.

SEEKING SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

If you took a snapshot of the US education system in 2014, you would have captured a persistent problem in action: One million high school students were dropping out of school every year. More than 40 percent of those in K–12 were predicted to struggle in math or reading. Only 40 percent of those aged 25 and over held a bachelor’s degree or higher, with great disparities along racial and socioeconomic lines.

Meanwhile, 17 million school-aged people had experienced three or more adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction, and 21 percent of all school-aged people lived in poverty. This is but a short list of grim statistics signaling a deeper systemic failure. "We were running out of a diatribe and prescriptive approaches to education where the only thing that seemed to matter was standardized test scores," says Ellen Moyle, founder and former CEO of New Teacher Center. "There was a paradigm shift that the only valid way to improve education was to measure students on math and reading and hold teachers accountable. At the same time, nightmares were showing up at the schoolhouse in dresse.

In the decade leading up to this, the number of nonprofits in the United States increased by 450,000, with nearly 60 percent of them focused on education, creating a fragmented and competitive field. Consequently, there was an emerging sense in the funding community that supporting isolated and uncoordinated action would never create the large-scale change that they wanted to see.

If necessity is the mother of invention, perhaps dissatisfaction is the father of action. And a set of change agents was determined to act. As City Year president Jim Shelton framed the challenge at that time: "This systemic failure was so crushing and extreme on the kids we served. We knew we had to think differently."

If you listened carefully to the visions and conversations the former City Year president Jim Shelton was helping to organize, you would hear a conversation about the need to fund a whole new system. New York City’s high schools were a case in point. Like virtually every school district in the country, the schools there were struggling to keep up with the needs of students and what they needed to meet.

The Reimagine Learning Network was launched to explore the space between these seemingly disparate groups focused on learning differences, social emotional learning, and trauma. Launched by Boston-based venture philanthropy organization NewProfit and supported with $13.6 million from funders including the Ford and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation, the Oak Foundation, the Peter Family Foundation, and eventually the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York, Reimagine Learning aimed to align the action of these diverse networks of change agents to support an approach to education based on a deep understanding of how students learn.

Even in its earliest days, Reimagine Learning knew it needed a collaborative approach to tackle such a complex problem, as underscored by New Profit president and CEO Vanessa Alford. "I knew it would take the alignment of others to get to deeper system shifts. Together we needed to tackle the
Changing the mindset or paradigm out of which a system arises is one of the most powerful leverage points you can affect.

As Jane Stenbring, Reimagining Learning’s former lead for regional partnerships, put it: “When people fall into a movement building or any kind of change process is in skipping the mindset shift and going right to strategies and tactics. It requires— and it did require with Reimagining Learning—people giving up their preconceptions, starting to think differently about what might be possible, and living in that together for a while. I think that’s when a lot of the difficult conversations and discomfort happens, when we were shifting mindsets together. It takes a long time, especially for something so entrenched.”

But gaining a head-worn mindset shift is only the first step in a journey. In the case of Reimagining Learning, getting to that “nullbaseline” took years, and that was only the beginning of the process to get to action on the ground that would drive outcomes for young people and families. What followed was a series of changes—within and among individuals and organizations, in classrooms and boardrooms, at the dinner table and on the floor of the US Senate—that reflected this reimagining, allowing the effort to move one step closer to unlocking the potential of all students.
For each of the six stages of the Network Lifecycle, we share a brief overview of that phase and a set of prototypical questions a group often explores when there. We then tell the story of Reimagine Learning when in each phase, mining our sources, conversations, and memories for the "moments that mattered.

For those curious about the nuts and bolts of the network we made as network facilitators in each phase, we have consolidated that information into a "Playbook" of tactical suggestions, which can be found on page 45. And for those intent on better understanding network impacts, we have traced the "threads of influence" the network achieved—some success stories and their often invisible ripple effects—in Figure 3 on page 34.
Discover
Map the landscape. Reframe the problem.

In this initial stage, we help participants outline their objectives and the assets they could contribute to a network, canvass the landscape of the issue in question, and identify the relevant stakeholders, including existing collaboratives. All of this work helps us determine whether a network is an appropriate approach and, if it is, where to begin. It also allows us to develop a preliminary perspective about who could contribute to the success of the collective’s strategy and should therefore be involved in the nascent network.

* Where do we start? Who are the stakeholders with influence in a given field? How are they connected, or not connected?
* How do we define the boundaries of this system? To what degree does the issue/problem overlap with other fields and sectors? Which aspects of the system should the network address?
* How do we understand the mental models that hold the current system in place, and how do we see the world differently? What is the status quo for this issue/problem?
* How do we reframe the opportunity?

“... We wanted the revolutionaries—the people who may have formal but also have informal influence in the space, the ones who may not necessarily be accepted in their world but are talking about collaboration, defying the current narrative, and creating a new narrative.”

—Shruti Sehra, managing partner, New Profit

To broaden the aperture of possibility, bring unlikely bedfellows to the table

There is a reason the Networked Landscape is represented as a circle. For one, network building defines trust, predictability, and timely processes. In work that’s largely about relationships—between people, ideas, organizations—it is sometimes hard to make out a clear “beginning,” to know what leads to what, to find where one phase ends and another begins. But each, the discover phase itself is not circular, fueled more by questions and a sense of wondering than by clear direction or firm convictions: How can a group work together to understand the systemic nature of the problem at hand? How do you merge competing or conflicting perspectives? How do you know who should be involved? Chances are you’ll find yourself asking and answering these questions more than once as you feel your way through the ambiguity that precedes action, and toward the opportunity for collective action.

At Shruti Sehra, managing partner of New Profit and lead of the Belonging Learning Fund, says of the early days: “We had lots of and lots of debates on where to focus.” Knecht characterized the era as one of “happily bashing” between perspectives, before a starting phase was defined.

But all stories begin somewhere. Often, they begin pretty close to home. Reimagine Learning’s story begins in 2012, when Knecht struck up a conversation with the trustees of the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation at New Profit’s annual Gathering of Leaders. Knecht, herself dyslexic, had recently enrolled her daughter, also dyslexic, in one of the best public schools for students with learning differences, only to watch her struggle. Her personal experience got her thinking more deeply about some of what she was seeing through her work at New Profit: “We had been hearing in more accessible education assessments, and every time organizations started talking about standardized tests. I thought, ‘That would have had no relevance to me because I’m dyslexic. I’m not in that field.’ I knew at a macro level that we were pushing forward [in education, generally], but as an individual, thinking about my experience and my daughter’s... the truth I was having was that our education system wasn’t working. We needed to open up the problem, understand it more holistically.”

When Knecht shared this with people at the Tower Foundation, their eyes lit up: “Wow, I think you are on to something. We recently revisited our focus area of focus and learning disabilities is now one of them,” said executive director Stacy Avers. With that, a partnership was born.

Around the same time, New Profit had been exploring more collaborative, networked ways of working. “When we had more was that if you bring funders and social entrepreneurs together in a room, there’s organic space for collaboration and experimentation as long as they’re not working on exactly the same thing,” Sehra says. With this top of mind, New Profit and the Tower Foundation set out to determine how they might support diverse learners—by building a network. During the summer of 2012, they conducted a feasibility analysis as a set of classes: Creating differences (LLE, mental health, social emotional development, and substance abuse) that they believed mainstream educators return (moderately addressed but had tremendous impact on students’ academic and life outcomes).
New Profit believed in the power of combining diverse perspectives to drive innovation and create new solutions to old problems.

With agreement on the combination of LD and SEL (borrow the de facto name “The LDSEL Domain”) as the focus and additional funding from the Oak Foundation and the PwC Family Foundation, the network launched in early 2013, with our team at Monitor Institute by Deloitte on board. This formal launch, however, was only the next step in the continuous iterative character of the discovery phase. How do we make sense of the problem, the (multiple) fields, and the people in it? 

In order to crack the question of where to focus, we needed to understand the ecosystems we were playing in. This is a prototypical first move for network builders: Start by understanding the system you are trying to change. As Kathleen McLeod Grant wrote in her 2012 AMP case study, “Many nonprofits and funders talk on this issue: They care about making better sense about the larger systems in which they are operating, the underlying causes of the problem, the levers needed to effect change, or the other players in the space. As a consequence, many programs end up only tackling one small piece of a larger puzzle, in isolation.”

Especially given the fragmented context out of which it was born, Retrospective Learning knew it had to be thoughtful and intentional in its design to avoid being one more voice in the chorus of social impact funders. If strategy about making choices, their strategy for a network focused on system change—versus programmatic intervention or scaling proven models through an organizational construct—requires leapfrog to illustrate what the portfolio of choices could even be. Doing this leapfrog allows networks—and allowed us with Retrospective Learning—to determine where to focus, and with whom, to optimize its role in the system.

We started by mapping the ideas and prevailing research on the key cognitive skills, social emotional competencies, and areas of content and academic knowledge that are important for any child to have to succeed in school and life. We knew that it was critical to understand our content in order to strategically connect to a larger set of activities already underway, but we also knew we had some exploring to do at this intersection of “cognitive and SEL,” as we called it. An analysis of the intertwined landscape at the time helped us begin exploring this interstitial space between LD and SEL, illuminating where
Know

In this phase, we leverage the collective intelligence of the network to better understand the issue in question. Typically, this allows a group to begin to mobilize behind a shared understanding and collective plan for action. We also learn more about assets and connections across the network, developing a perspective about ways to strengthen it. We think about how to design processes and moments that can begin to strengthen relationships within the network, identify common ground, and begin to craft a shared narrative that can bind the group to the change that members want to see in the world.

One of Reimagine Learning’s greatest accomplishments was to name that people working in their separate universes were trying to tackle different pieces of the same puzzle. Each organization provided a different lens. The network brought those lenses together.

—Pamela Cantor, founder and senior science adviser, Turnaround for Children

To shift the status quo, imagine the future you want to create

The cornerstone of deep change rests on the ability to crystallize a story that’s not yet true. This becomes the rocket fuel for a network’s momentum: a vision of the future forged through divergent opinions, acceptance of varied perspectives, and a slight yielding of an individual organization’s own well-loved scripts. There is a necessity, in any group’s evolution, to work together more effectively, to spiral up to a more encompassing narrative for change and to author this story of the future together, as complicated as that may be.

The Reimagine Learning network spent many months working to envision behind a story they could all believe in, which would ultimately allow them to reorient their organizations behind it in powerful and impactful ways. But developing a collective vision is an ongoing, painstaking enterprise. It is a human nature to cling to organizational prescriptive and firmly held theories of change that have served us well. In the marketplace for solutions, human, and reputational capital is often at play. A leader needs to shift her worldview and try on other organizational perspectives and to understand the forces that are shaping the network’s formation. At first, everyone in the room was organization-driven. They weren’t thinking big picture, at a field level. Everyone was coming from a competitive standpoint. People believed strongly that their way was the right way. These people had never seen eye to eye and were all wondering what they were going to do together.

The cornerstone of deep change rests on the ability to crystallize a story that’s not yet true.

Or as Buller puts it: “Everyone was looking through the same camera, but the angles were all off a little bit.” This situation is by no means unique to the education space. It is fair to assume that for whatever area you are working in—health, environment, youth development, early childhood, college access and completion, workforce development—you are facing a landscape filled with competing, and perhaps conflicting, perspectives. Diversity of opinion and approaches can be a valuable resource—creating a “valuable instability” from which new insights can be gained. But when this diversity creates isolated silos of effort, it can create fragmentation, lead to duplication of efforts, and fuel confusion and frustration that undermine impact. This divergence that creates dissonance is often where aligned action efforts begin. Recognizing and working through this tension—in fact, seeing it as a source of new possibility—is a key step to generating a bigger story of change. This is the tough but essential work of shifting the human system before one can ever hope to make sustainable progress on the problem system. We believe it is at the heart of any systems change effort.

To create a more complete and compelling picture, one with complementary angles, our job became to articulate the role of diplomatic negotiation, shifting among the different participant camps, highlighting where there was more commonality than difference, discovering and respecting the ground that could not be normalized, working greater potential. This required a process of authentic engagement, deep listening, and rigorous analysis to build the evidence and generate a storyline that allowed key players to see possibilities they had been unable to see before. It’s also a process that requires leadership and patience and, if bypassed or given short shrift, risks blinding future efforts on a daily basis.

As Harold Kazin and Chet Tischler state about network construction, “the greater the amount of shared identity, of values and goals that partners have in common, the stronger the network will be... It’s hard to give up one’s own worldview, but working in a larger network requires members to feel part of a new common identity.”
Shifting a system

With Reimagine Learning, we were facing a diverse group of nonprofit leaders beholden to their individual theories of change, admittedly varying from diverse “camps” within the education landscape, holding fast to their assumptions about the problem and the needed set of solutions, even while driven to create change together. We knew we had to start by shifting people out of comfortable habits of thought—and to take a more outside-in view to help us identify and plan for the external influences and uncertainties that would have significant impact on our work together.

Developing an effective network strategy depends on a collective understanding of what future may emerge—a future in which any strategy will need to evolve. Scenario work is a highly effective tool to do this. Scenarios are rich stories about tomorrow that one drives better decisions today. They are hypotheses, not predictions, that describe a range of possibilities for the future; they invite people to create imaginative narratives that are still plausible and logical, and that stretch thinking in new ways.8

We designed the network’s first official scenario-building as an iteration into a scenario-planning process that achieved several objectives. The first was to develop a broader view of the challenges the world might face in the future. We also worked to identify and challenge individual assumptions and conventional wisdom about both the LEF and SEL spaces in which we know people were tightly clinging and, from that, create plausible, challenging, and divergent scenarios for how the education field might evolve. Our final objective was to discuss the policy implications for the network given the range of possible futures. If a group wants to change the world, it first needs to understand how the world might change.

The final question for the day was a deceptively simple one: “How might the education landscape change or evolve over the next 15 years?” Through brainstorming interviews, the group had surfaced a host of critical uncertainties—those factors seen to be both most important and most uncertain in shaping the future education landscape. Fragmented into five key integrators, these uncertainties became the building blocks for the six-teams’ 15 scenarios of possible futures. They also became important externalities the group needed to have in its collective radar as we advanced. These are changes in the broader environment that are primarily independent from yet could influence our work.9

Common themes began to emerge from the range of different stories the participants generated, both about current perceived realities and anticipated future trends. Participants surfaced themes like: The current system is failing young people, especially those with learning differences; there is no such thing as an “average” learner (thank you to Todd Rose for this language); teachers are not being effectively trained to how to prepare students for this 21st-century world, including how to differentiate instruction and foster social and emotional development; young people need a set of skills broader than the “3 R’s” to succeed; the “age of austerity” will continue, forcing the education system to do more with less; the demand for students to be college- and career-ready will increase. While the goal of this effort was not to predict the future from a collective crystal ball, the insights gained served as critical DNA against which to test eventual scenarios.

Developing an effective network strategy depends on a collective understanding of what future may emerge—a future in which any strategy will need to exist.

The Reimagine Learning network and how to tackle persistent problems

- There is no such thing as the “average learner,” so instructional approaches should be personalized to support differing talents and needs.
- While both cognitive and social emotional skills are important, the best learning environments are ones that recognize that these skills are inextricably linked and together drive academic performance, well-being, and life success.
- Instead of organizing doing things in, to, and for young people, students should be guides in their own learning journeys and ultimately agents of change in society.

These core beliefs would allow the group to start to “frame” itself in a different way. Nurturing more support to participate, most of whom tended to focus on one or two of the beliefs in their own work, and how all three worked in concert with one another. As unforeseen as those beliefs may seem now, they were undoubtedly hard won in 2015. They represented an aperture-widening perspective by the group on the challenges at hand—and, more importantly, allowed the group to move one step closer to shared action.
Knit
Deepen strategies. Learn by doing.

In this phase, we stitch together people and strategies in a process of defining, testing, and refining our approach. We use the shared narrative to get clearer on the network’s purpose and beneficiaries, and design pilots to test which ideas are ripest for action. As we refine the strategy, we begin designing a structure for the network that can deliver on that strategy, including infrastructure for the network to learn as it goes along. This process builds collective confidence as participants get clearer on what the network could do to bring its ideas to life. When we begin to find the intersection of individual goals and collective intent, we strengthen the value proposition for participation, ultimately increasing the network’s potential for effectiveness.

To make collective progress, embrace the intellectual humility of uncertainty

At some point in a network’s evolution, it becomes time to roll up the proverbial sleeves and get to work. To recognize emerging network leaders and begin to operationalize activity. By August

WORKING THROUGH WORKING GROUPS

Complex Learner. Informed the network’s broader thinking about the students “slipping through the cracks,” as well as sizing work to quantify this population.
Culture Change. Explored strategies for changing the way people understand themselves in relation with each other and the world—both in terms of beliefs and behaviors.
Fortified Environment. Developed a framework for what constitutes a strong and sustainable environment for teaching and learning.
Leaner Profile System. Explored guiding principles and design elements for a new tool for learners.
Measurement, Learning, Evaluation. Developed a new tool around how to understand and track network impact.
Regional Impact Strategy. Clarified goals and objectives for the regional impact strategy, explored options for how the domain could come together, and defined conditions for entry into a geographic policy.
Network Strategy. Refined the network’s plan for impact and general operating strategy and structure.

A precursor to any collective work is tilling the soil, building trusting relationships, enabling people to muck around for a while to get to the open-minded stance necessary to be aligned in action. This can be a long and painful process, but it’s absolutely critical.”

—Vanessa Kirsch, founder and CEO, New Profit

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As such, it wasn’t just an exposure to new ideas through the many working groups that proved to be the primary catalytic force for the network. It was, rather, the deep and lasting relationships forged through shared commitments to create something better than any leader or organization could have done on their own. It’s a sentiment echoed by Lipa to fico founder and CEO Daniel Fish. “There really was magic in the people. The work and structure around us quite a bit different, but there was something about the way people worked here. We showed up working our best, but we knew we all needed to win together to win individually. So people were there to give something, not take something. And what they got was in times in return. That was distinctly true for us.”

Cherishing the efforts of each working group is not possible within the confines of this article, but we can highlight a few that created key moments for the network. The rest of this section dives into the Complex Learner and Fortified Environment working groups, here we depict the kind of processes required to support members to collaborate productively and begin to develop a shared vision, as well as focus on the wealth of intellectual capital developed by a cross-section of education leaders as they explored what one of them framed as a “new digital frontier.”

**COMPLEX LEARNER WORKING GROUP**

In aligned action efforts, developing a shared vocabulary to bind a group is often one of the first critical steps to take. From the early days of Refracting Learning, we made explicit the different perspectives of the members. We named the areas of overlap and divergence so we could then begin to understand where consensus ground may lay. Each organization had its own perspective of the nature of the problem, defined the target student populations in different ways, and used different programmatic models. It was a disorienting—yet powerful—moment of transformation. The efforts of the Complex Learner working group became the intellectual glue to help the network gain traction. Network members differed in the definition of the child they sought to serve, using a range of factors each as a student’s age, learning profile, and socioeconomic background as definitional means. Until the group developed a shared definition of who we serve, any discussion around implementing solutions would be isolated before it even left the station. “The population needs to be defined,” remarked James Widner, network participant, past working group member, and then-executive director of National Center for Learning Disabilities. “We know intuitively that complex learners goes beyond the 10 percent of kids with learning and attention issues. Using this work will let us move beyond our pigeonholes.”

The efforts of the Complex Learner working group became the intellectual glue to help the network gain traction.

The group worked hard to incorporate learning-edge insights from neuroscience that helped to illuminate connections across the different target populations the network served. They started to recognize an opportunity to learn from and make inroads into accounts about the brain-based and environmental factors that influence the cognitive and social-emotional development of different types of learners. This notion of a complex learner began to emerge, particularly in contrast to the “single school” where these learners often found themselves. The working group leaders—Josh Drollin, Mary-Dee Barfield, and Chris Galvez—formed a one-page definition to bring back to the network for input. The group defined a complex learner as anyone whose profile evidences vulnerabilities in one or more of these factors: opportunity for learning, dispositions for learning, and neurodevelopmental integrality for learning, preferences for learning—or when a student’s learning profile is mismatched to the instructional environment provided.

While this definition served more for internal alignment among network participants for internal purposes, it helped galvanize the group behind the emerging groundswell at the time around a more holistic view of whom they collectively served. “We actually agreed on what we know of now as the white child, but then, we came at this from different perspectives, which we had to work really hard to reconcile,” notes Boe, a member of the Complex Learners working group. “If you went with only IEPs or only LDs, you wouldn’t have had the tension and deliberation and adversity, which made for a pretty interesting learning context. Ultimately, the network provided access to cutting-edge information and thinkers that helped reinforce the fact that our strategy and work needed to be grounded in what students need.”

With a working definition of whom to serve under its collective belt, two additional questions began to emerge that the Complex Learner working group took on: How can we better understand the range of students behind the complex learner definition and prioritize within this? And fundamentally, how big is this population? To bring to life the range of complex learners, the “blurred learner by Dakistin developed a set of eight student personas using human-centered design approaches to illuminate these backgrounds, desired experiences, attitudes and beliefs, and behaviors. We shared the personas in a convening and fed the network through a prioritization exercise. With “real” personas front and center, the group was able to have a different kind of conversation about who these priorities and why. Importantly, the personas illustrated the ways in which the complex-learner variables often came together to shape individual and intensively highlighted for the group the prevalence of complex learners in low-income communities, where opportunity for learning and instructional environments tends to be disproportionately affected. This conversation was a breakthrough—ultimately, the network had created something that numbers could sell get behind: prioritizing complex learners from low-income families.

The network provided access to cutting-edge information and thinkers that helped reinforce the fact that the strategy and work needed to be grounded in what students need.

This agreement led us to conduct a series of analyses to understand the magnitude of this population. We utilized four categories of data for the purposes of targeting complex learners—students who have an identified learning disability, an unclassified/unidentified learning and attention issues, are English language learners, or have experienced trauma (as defined by three or more adverse childhood experiences). Using this data, we found that there were between 10.8 and 14.1 million school-aged complex learners living in low-income families. This number accounted for 44 percent to 59 percent of young people in low-income families and 25 percent to 29 percent of all school-aged children in the MA public education system.

It was a radical wake-up call for the network participants, leading to these immediate realizations. First, at 44 percent to 59 percent of all young people in low-income families, participants understood that there is a significant overlap between complex learners and low-income communities—and, therefore, the group would no longer afford to think of these as two separate populations. Rather, they needed to advocate for and develop interventions that recognize and solve for the multiple realities of these students. Second, at 25 percent to 29 percent of all school-aged children, the network felt it had uncovered a group that was rarely marginalized when it comes to student was nonetheless often relegated to the margins of our current education system.
In other words, the network’s vision for learning could serve and immediately benefit a significant population of students. And last, fostering on this population allowed the network to take a “tangential universalism” approach. As member organizations were able to develop student-centric learning and teaching environments that can genuinely help students who struggle and are poorly served, then they would ultimately be able to serve all kids more effectively.

**FORTIFIED ENVIRONMENT WORKING GROUP**

With a definition of whom the network could serve emerging in each working group, another session focused on what would constitute the most effective environment to support that student. The Fortified Environment working group included a range of organizations gathered to advance a critical theory of action. This group aimed to define a set of attributes and practices that described a fortified environment with the power to mitigate the specific risks to development and learning associated with poverty and promote student development and achievement for all students. They worked together over weeks to draft a prototype grounded in the field of child development, neuroscience, social emotional learning, and evidence-based transformational practices of high-performing schools.

The common belief underlying this group’s work was the recognition that developmental variation among children is the norm, not the exception. If you accept that premise, then you cannot deny the reality that few American schools were designed to support human variability. The network afforded the group the time, space, and support to unpack this belief and develop a collective solution. “If you go way back to the beginning of Reimagine Learning, it was a precious moment where we were allowed to step back and question what we know about how learning and development happens,” reflects Pam Cantor, lead of the Fortified Environment working group. “Children rarely ever have just one thing going on. The systems in which our children grow and develop, particularly if they grow up in adverse environments, really don’t get development and developmental variability. I was deeply disturbed by scholars that conjectured, idealized, and sorted children—based on race, gender, culture. All of this was prevalent to everything I knew from the research about what develops a whole child.”

Cantor added a personal reflection based on an intuition that evolved through the course of this work. “When I think back to who I was at the beginning of Reimagine Learning, I was keenly aware of the developmental issues around trauma. I was aware that under-resourced schools and communities, especially when it comes to trauma, are a good place to start in the right direction.”

The eventual prototype the group developed described the attributes of a fortified environment, the required competencies of the adults, and the contributions of a student guided to achieve college and career-ready standards. It was a process of identifying and then stitching together essential elements into a more cohesive framework—and, as importantly, a collective assertion to move beyond fragmented and uncoordinated approaches to serving students of need. As the introduction to the document reads:

> “The experience that each of us has had individually confirms that no matter how strong any one intervention is, and no matter how great our individual accomplishments as organizations are, no single intervention or organization is sufficiently strong enough to meet the variability of stress, development, performance, or challenge that we see in our underperforming schools—and to do so at scale. Together, Reimagine Learning advocated strongly for federal leadership that will support and incentivize states, districts, and schools to implement comprehensive strategies to build fortified environments in all schools serving high concentrations of students growing up in poverty.”

Creating a unified theory was admission of an addiction to done. The group recognized that there were existing bright spots of optimal learning environments; the problem was that those exemplars were rare and seldom, with the potential to benefit many but accessible to only a few. So the challenge became how to take things that were rare and expensive and make them affordable and accessible: the definition of disruptive innovation, and the true evidence underlying the network’s efforts. “We should think about the idea of innovation from the edge,” Buhren stressed at the time. “Trying to change all education in the country is daunting. But if you can do the best of 12 and 7th, education in high power, it’s like creating the New York story— if you can do it there, you can do it anywhere.”

We know that networks can foster innovation and interventions. They can serve as important spaces for, as几分钟 before, people to “think around the way to get the open-minded mindset necessary to be aligned in action.” Creating collective knowledge while understanding that can only be gained by working together—by us all—made the participants of Reimagine Learning, this “moving around” together become a key ingredient for moving into action.

**WHEN PREPARATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY**

“Policy happens when preparation meets opportunity.” Such is the motto of America Forward, New Profit’s nonprofit policy initiative, formed to transform local impact into national change by leveraging social innovators’ collective advisory power. With the expertise of America Forward and this motto in hand, Reimagine Learning knew that it had to affect policy if it wanted to affect systems. “Even before launching Reimagine Learning,” says Serina, “we knew that investment in policy change had to be a key part of our strategy. We recognized how policy had contributed to the overwhelming priority of standardized test scores in the era of No Child Left Behind, driving us to a sense of urgency that led to the creation of Reimagine Learning.”

In 2013, Reimagine Learning formed a policy working group, composed of a cross-section of network members representing more than 60 organizations, led by America Forward and advised by policy consultants from Public Impact, the Education Council, and the Lenna Hill Group. While there were no major K-12 federal policies under Reimagine Learning’s watch at the time, the group focused on preparation for the moment key legislation might emerge.

The working group developed a set of policy principles and priorities that could ultimately be integrated into many different policy vehicles. Their thinking reflected core themes of the network, such as commitment to innovation and equity, effective teaching and school leadership, and investing in what works, as well as the groups’ particular focus on complex learners. The working group sought to develop a shared perspective on how federal policies could support strong accountability for states and districts on student outcomes, while providing them with room to innovate and flexibility to shape state and local policies and practices to meet the needs of their communities. “The idea was for the framework to become our north star, something that could guide day-to-day advocacy,” describes Sarah Crab, formerly of New Profit. To orient the group behind a common policy agenda, America Forward conducted a high-intensity process gathering input, integrating language and analytics from different organizations’ existing work, and holding feedback conversations until the working group could settle on a plan. This was then ratified by the broader network.

Continued...
**Organize**

Moving from curiosity to action.

Here we work to put in place the plans and frameworks that will enable the group to coordinate their efforts and adapt as needed in the coming years. We fine-tune strategic agendas, create plans for implementation, explore protocols and systems for ongoing information-sharing and dialogue across the network, and develop flexible and transparent network governance structures. This allows the group members to get to action together, so that they can not only make progress toward their collective goals or vision but also get smarter about how to get there by incorporating what they learn in a cycle of continuous improvement.

- Which experiments should the network explore together? How should it sequence them?
- What is the menu of strategic partnerships that the network could pursue, among participants or with external partners?
- What is the give-get for these partnerships? What barriers/risks should they consider?
- What kind of governance structure will maximize leadership and ownership?
- What type of support is needed to advance the group’s work?

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“…were coming out of a didactic and prescriptive approach to education where the only thing that seemed to matter was standardized test scores. I felt that the term ‘reimagining learning’ was an inquiry and an opening of curiosity. It engendered this feeling that anyone could come along.”

—Ellen Moir, founder and former CEO, New Teacher Center
To deepen organizational capacity, nurture individual curiosity

The deceptively simple insight at the core of Reimagine Learning’s strategy was that the outcomes for complex learners—those with learning differences and exposed to high doses of trauma—can never be improved if teachers and school leaders lack the understanding of and capacity to serve their needs. This insight revealed a key intervention point for the network: to build the capacity of platform organizations to support teachers and school leaders in serving complex learners.

Much of the training around Reimagine Learning’s “platform strategy” at the time was influenced, as Helga underscores, by Steven Johnson’s book *Where Great Minds Come From: The History of Innovation,* which explores concepts such as ecosystem engineers, liquid networks, the adjacent possible, and the power of slow branches. Johnson talked a lot about the power of platforms as hubs for innovation. Our interpretation of this was that we could stack innovations on top of platform organizations like Teach For America, New Teacher Center, Achievement Networks, and City Year,* shares Helga. Working with and through organizations with significant scale and reach—suitable platforms—was key. “That one and operational stability afforded them room to play and innovate with something they might not have previously been focused on. If New Teacher Center, for example, could do something for diverse learners across their whole network, serving 2.5 million students annually, we realized this would be a powerful place to focus our strategy.”

But capacity isn’t something that simply crystallizes in perfect form with the signing of a capacity-building grant. It needs to reside within the more foundational beliefs of that organization’s people and become seamlessly integrated into the model. This meant that in order to develop the capacity of platform organizations to serve diverse learners, we needed to work together with teachers and school leaders along a critical change continuum.* More importantly, we needed to support leaders not just in the development of new ideas but how to disseminate those ideas through their own organizations.

In order to develop the capacity of platform organizations to serve diverse learners, the network needed to move leaders and their teams along a critical change continuum.

The belief was that a mindset shift—the head-wind of transformative change begins with curiosity and a willingness to see things differently. But a shift in mindset, without a commitment to change, is like trying to complete a puzzle with half the pieces missing. You can get only so far. Once made, a mindset shift can lead to a commitment to change, and this commitment can evolve into development of a deeper capacity, if appropriately

resourced. Ultimately, from capacity comes action and experimentation.

It would be unfortunate to assume that all this means is that we have to develop more facts-based, evidence-backed treaties to speak logic to skepticism in order to change people’s minds. If only change were that simple. As Helga states: “We understood basic behavior change models that stressed the importance of education to lead to a shift in mindset or attitude. But we struggled with this. It’s not just about advocacy. You don’t just deliver knowledge to somebody, pull that flier, and be done with it. People need to be open.”

Arguably, the work the group did together through the preceding three stages of the network’s evolution—exploring a knowledge frontier, developing a shared narrative, building a common vocabulary, identifying collaborative activities—was about moving through this continuum in different ways. By 2018, Reimagine Learning had invested in 23 social-entrepreneur-led organizations totaling $170-185 million across approximately 7 million students nationwide. Each of these organizations was actively investing in building internal skills and capabilities to support diverse learners, as defined by the network, and piloting innovative practices to better serve these students. In addition to the collaborations between the network’s grantees organizations, there was an impromptu “Moosical collaboration” launched between network organizations, as reported by evaluators Research for Action in its 2017 report.* While the impact of these collaborations is not a focus of this case study, it speaks to the influence of the network more broadly, which the following section explores more deeply.

**ONE LEADER AND HER JOURNEY TO CHANGE**

But just what does it take for a leader to take the journey along this change continuum? How does leader succeed in the critical act of translating personal instinct into organizational focus? What follows is one story of the journey that a leader in the network took along the path from curiosity to capacity, and provides us insight into the nonlinear, messy, hard work that goes into the broad encompassing notion of systemic change.

More Segal, CEO of Achievement Network (A3N), undertook the opportunity and the challenge—inherently in this journey. At 21 in an organization that supports educators through formative assessments and data that help teachers understand what instructional moves will help advance student learning. It was one of the network’s first grantees. In 2012, as a $150,000,7 million organization serving 117,000 students in 517 schools. A3N was in the early stages of developing its coaching and assessment models to take into account the variability of students. Leaders were still grappling with a set of questions, at a basic level, that were at the core of “curiosity and intentionality” in their capabilities: How to develop assessments that truly allow every student to show what they know and what they can do? How do you design a model that gets a whole school approach right? How do you turn hard-to-gain data into actionable information?

It was in this moment that Segal felt a realization: a blind spot and realized an opportunity: “There was an opportunity to sit up upon the moment of the education reform movement that used language such as ‘all kids’ and talked about ‘high expectations’ and to really ask who we actually were serving and who we weren’t serving in an ‘all kids agenda.’”

To really define a clear set of values and shared definition of what we meant when we said ‘all kids,” she says, Segal also talks about needing to find that critical piece to aligned action efforts in which an organization’s mission connects with the collective intent, discussed in the Exos section. “I had to get to clarity as to why this work around understanding the needs of diverse learners mattered through the context of my own organization’s mission. How do I do all of these conversations into a logical frame? I had to work hard to make sense of all of different angles and perspectives in the room as we went into multiple weeks together over multiple months. There was some healthy jockeying for individual perspectives of what mattered most.”

Translating “mindset clarity,” as Segal calls it, into organizational commitment and capacity

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*Source: New Profit.*
to execute is "one of the hardest things to do as a leader." For her and her team, this transition started with a small commitment to launch a pilot in a set of schools to test a new coaching approach for teachers working with students with learning and attention issues. In addition to the pilot, they formed a "mind trust" to track what was happening and ways to adapt their assessments and coaching services, in order to begin to more deeply embed this thinking and way of operating in the organization. The initial results were impressive. In one of the three pilot schools, with high percentages of students with learning and attention issues, ANET's interventions showed dramatic 27 percent one-year percentile gains in English language arts; and the interim data ANET was able to provide teachers enabled them to "differentiate instruction across groups of students" in powerful new ways.

When it finally came to a need to acquire funding to support innovations, "We were building commitment through a group of folks in the organization, and we soon realized that the work we needed to do in the capacity phase was not funded," Segal acknowledges. The commitment ANET was demonstrating gained it a grant from the Power Family Foundation, one of Reimaginig Learning's network funders, to continue to develop their capacity. ANET launched an online formative assessment system to take advantage of technology advances that were fostering better ways to assess the depth of student learning. This would help ensure that students could show what they actually knew and not just "watered down by complexity in the actual assessment structure itself," as Segal puts it.

This shift from commitment to capacity is also a moment when network efforts often stall—the point at which commitment for capacity development has been hard-won by a leader and her team, who stand ready to mobilize the organization yet struggle to access the resources needed for capacity to support transformative change. These common tendencies reinforce the importance of having both practitioners and funders at the collective table.

Shifting a system

The Reimagine Learning network and how to tackle persistent problems

CANNATIONAL NETWORK MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN A LOCAL COMMUNITY?

An animating question for Reimagine Learning was: New organizational, operating in different settings across the country, could work together in a region. The Tower Foundation was particularly interested in creating a set of proof points in school districts within its geographic footprint that were remaking educational approaches to support diverse learners. This launched a series of regional initiatives working directly with the leaders and community members of Lawrence, Salem, and six other school districts in Essex County, Massachusetts, led by Lehmg (see figure 5). "[The] networks of influence," for some of the outcomes, this work is still underway, but we've pulled out a few lessons learned along the way about bringing a national network to bear in a local community:

Find the right partners and invest in relationships. Like most change efforts, regional work begins and ends with relationships. For Reimagine Learning, the key was to work with forward-looking local leaders such as Jeff Ray, then-superintendent in Lawrence, and Sam Piazza, then-superintendent in Salem. These leaders were eager to work with outside organizations who could help them think and act differently, and who could increase capacity in other budget-starved school districts. These relationships helped Reimagine Learning build “a deeper understanding and trust” with school district and community members, and learn the “infrastructure and politics which are so important,” says Sawicki. "You can't just bring organizations into a region without proper introduction and onboarding.”

Take a back seat. Set partners up for long-term success. On-the-ground work must be responsive to the ground needs. “Busy teachers and administrators cannot be expected to run learning laboratories for philanthropic foundations; however well-intentioned they may be,” says Sawicki. In addition to being responsive to local needs, it’s critical to account for how the work should be delivered, ensuring the work is sustainable once the dedicated facilitators and funding are gone. To do this, engaging community members and empowering local leaders is key (see “An Educator’s Guide to Community-Engaged Strategic Planning” for details on how Reimagine Learning did this. “We made a decision at the very beginning to be back-of-the-room facilitators so school districts could own the work,” Lehmg says.

Create feedback loops with the broader network. Reimagine Learning’s regional work brought values of the network and some of its people (such as the faculty advisors in the Essex County Learning Community) into new places, but a more explicit connection—and opportunity to share learning—was often lost between the “40,000-foot” work of the network and the on-the-ground work happening in schools. gymnasiums or the superintendent's office. As Sawicki reflects, "I don't think we infused enough of the resources of the network in our regional work. For instance, how do you feed the capacity-building lessons from the districts back to the network? How do you engage the network in seeing this world?” That feedback loop was missing. "One way Reimagine Learning addressed this was by hosting a panel of the regional leaders at their national convening. While it was well attended, the leaders acknowledged that this kind of cross-sharing could have happened sooner and more often.

Recognize that every school district needs a responsive and respectful outside partner. School leaders and teachers are inundated with mandates, initiatives, and the underlying urgency of everyday life in schools. In such an environment, they rarely have the time to intentionally create a space for new learning and reflection. An outside partner can help create this space and hold districts accountable to themselves. Such a space can help ensure that the “right people are coming together in the right ways over the right period of time to learn, set goals, and implement with fidelity.”

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Grow
Grow the group. Increase impact. Build tighter connections.

In this stage, we grow and diversify network participation while maintaining the delicate balance of trust and connectivity as the network expands. As the network spreads and likely decentralizes, we determine how to sustainably support ongoing activity. We ask how we can increase the network’s impact by expanding our reach, reframing the issue, and/ or evolving the strategic agenda. At the same time, we motivate the existing group by reinforcing the shared narrative and highlighting the results to date.

• How do we shine a light on the ongoing work? How do we help participants articulate the KQs, internally and externally?
• What has the group learned from its experiments/work together? Should the group’s goals, strategies, and/or activities change as a result?
• Based on what’s been learned, are there new opportunities for the network to engage, potentially with other fields/sectors?
• What infrastructure and/or systems are needed to evolve the network to the next level?

I thought that in order for Reimagine Learning to be successful, we would have to hit on one specific, measurable thing to influence. That wasn’t the case, and yet there’s still so much richness in the ripple effects.

—Ashley Sanfilippo, Posse Family Foundation

To understand network impact, accept a broader definition of measurable value

Perhaps one of the biggest questions about networks is how to measure success. There is a greater complexity to monitoring, evaluation, and learning with a network than there is with a point-in-time programmatic intervention or a direct service model. The benefit of a network — its ability to serve as a powerful platform from which a portfolio of interventions can be launched — both a blessing and a challenge. In a network, activity and interventions can be distributed and decentralized. Interventions can exist at different altitudes of ambition, with different time horizons, and pull different levers for change. With some interventions, we will be able to prove direct causal links. For others, it will be harder to tease out the threads of influence. And ultimately, network bodies need to be interested in measures at three different levels: internal network operations, external network effects, and field level or systemwide changes.

For instance, one measure of success to which many networks hold themselves accountable is membership or growth in the number of participants. Or they look at issues of connectivity, how connections are structured, and what flows through them. These are easy to track. Keep a tally of participants over time and conduct a mental network analysis to visualize what is connected to whom and the shape of the network. However, a network tracks the spread and adoption of exemplars, principles, practices, or innovations — all important issues for Reimagining Learning — in another matter altogether.

Likewise, at that time, others were pushing the way to advancing the field’s capacity around network impact. In their 2014 “Pruning Paper: The state of network evaluation,” Network Impact and the Center for Evaluation Innovation outline the unique aspects of networks that make their evaluation particularly complex:

• Networks have numerous players, many of whom invest and mix the network.
• Networks are dynamic “moving targets” that adapt, often rapidly, to changes in their context or change among their membership.
• It takes time to organize networks effectively and show results.
• Networks have “nodes of impact” — that is, network impact their members, members impact their local environments, and members combine impact their broader environment.
• Network shape and function matter.

Networks have a measurable value that is not limited to outcomes and outputs, and measure- ment should be used to attend to them. What participants get out of a network, how efficient it is, at creating value for participants, how sustainable it is, and if the innovation it produces are all major. And these factors need to be trusted. With all this in mind, Reimagine Learning knew that it had to find its own way around these challenges if it wanted to improve and strengthen the group’s collective work. The working group was guided by a clear goal of developing a measurement framework (defining what to measure) and a road map for gathering evidence (defining how to measure) that would be useful in decision-making. The group explored questions such as: Who will use the monitoring, evaluation, and learning MEQ framework, and how will they use it? What are the key decisions that need to be made? Through this exploration, the group developed an MEQ framework (see figure 4), adapted from Network Impact and the Center for Evaluation Innovation, to fit the network’s unique needs.

With a framework in hand, several of the working groups went through key decision points and test measurement and tracking decisions to them. What baseline information did they need to collect at the onset to be able to track changes over time? What did they still need to determine about goals and objectives — and how best to measure that? Three key findings emerged from this work around measurement that helped each diverse member around a shared frame:
The framework had to serve a range of audiences.

While the diversity of Reimagine Learning’s members could be considered one of its greatest strengths—the innovation engine—it presented some challenges in terms of measurement. Different stakeholders had different interests and needs. Funders were understandably eager to get to measuring direct outcomes and impacts, such as: How do we know the network is having an effect on education, young people, and families? Practitioners, while deeply committed to outcomes and impact, felt that some of their ideas and interventions were in exploratory modes and that pushing for direct outcomes too soon would hamstring rather than promote innovation. As a result, they wanted to explicitly define and differentiate innovation learnings from other types of network effects that they would measure. And so, the question here became: How do we know we are learning from each other and creating what works for our beneficiaries?

Meanwhile, the network facilitators were interested in all of the above and network operations. How do we know the network is healthy and that the structure is right for the purpose we hope you achieve?

Distinguishing between those measures allowed the network to value all of them. To the adaptors, people value what can be measured—even if they can’t always measure what they value. It is worth noting, however, that the network made intentional choices about how to measure much of these. It was a key principle of the working group to match the level of measurement rigor and resources needs with the purpose and audience for the measurement and learning work. In other words, the working group participants wanted to be respectful of the network’s time and resources—and recognize that not everything had to be measured to the same level of detail.

The working group participants wanted to be respectful of the network’s time and resources—and recognize that not everything had to be measured to the same level of detail.

We also knew that monitoring externalities—changes in the broader environment that would inevitably affect the network’s efforts—a measure that often gets left out of M&E even if people are doing it. Explicitly, it would be important to us to monitor and adapt. This led to doing scenario planning with the group (see the “Know” section) was one of our first endeavors as a collective. It was, in fact, an act of monitoring externalities as we explored a broad set of trends and futures. It was important to name this level in our framework—not to suggest that we had to avoid a scenario planning exercise every time we were together but that we did...
have to continuously evaluate the environment in which we were operating. If we wanted to change it, as it evolves as systems change over time, it can be quite different. How do the rules change? How do the stakeholders change? How do the metrics change? How do the funding flows change?

Reimagine Learning was a network purpose-built to promote innovation and system-level spread of those innovations, and its measurement framework had to reflect that.

THE FRAMEWORK HAD TO SERVE A RANGE OF TIME HORIZONS.

Differentiating between all of these measures was also especially important because we knew that some measures are more relevant to certain time horizons than others. For example, when we were in the early Knox/Knut phase, we knew we needed to measure network membership and connectivity to assess the network’s structural and establish a baseline for future comparison. To support this, we conducted an in-depth social network analysis. See the “Playbook” for details. But it wasn’t until later, in the Organic phase, that we began to see (and that could measure) innovation learnings, outcomes, and impacts, such as the development of the Optimal Learning Environment and the New Teacher Center and the resulting outcomes for their teachers and students (see the Organic section for more detail). And it wasn’t until we entered the Growth phase that we could begin to understand how the six phases in the Network Lifecycle are not precisely linear, and the associated measures aren’t either. You may see some innovation learnings emerge before you’ve quite figured out what the right infrastructure will be. And even when you’ve had several years into network efforts, you’ll probably still be monitoring membership and evaluating the network’s value propositions. Like all things with networks, measurement requires patience, iteration, and constant fine-tuning. But just as networks broadly follow the arc of the Network Lifecycle, measures—what you’re able to see and assess—also broadly follow the network’s evolution from left to right on our MEL framework. And of course, there’s nothing about field building that happens overnight.

In 2017, New Profit partnered with Research for Action to conduct three third-party studies, evaluating how grantees had been affected, how the network as a whole had been affected, and how the field had changed since the launch of Reimagine Learning (focusing primarily to the network structure, network health, and (dis)enrollment components of the MEL framework). The grantees evaluation showed that grantees most commonly reported building deeper understanding and awareness of complex learners needs as one of the most important outcomes of their involvement with the Reimagine Learning Fund, along with the benefits they received through the strategic support from New Profit and the opportunity to collaborate with their peers informally and formally.

The network study reported significant growth in the number of people participating in the network in some way and significant collaboration among network members, including new formal partnerships and funding relationships. It revealed that network members valued different elements of network offerings (convenings, virtual learning sessions, etc.) and had varying perceptions of the network’s purpose and value proposition but showed strong alignment around Reimagine Learning’s vision and three core beliefs. Finally, their analysis of the national discourse on education topics highlighted an increase from 2011–2013 to use of terms related to Reimagine Learning (such as “social emotional learning”), suggesting an uptick in the broader movement of which Reimagine Learning was a part.

As we have revisited Reimagine Learning with participants six years later, we have heard stories of success across this framework. The more we talked to people, the more we realized that in addition to the stories themselves—powerful in their own right—we were seeing a pattern of connectivity. Ideas and relationships had spread in ways we had not anticipated or even imagined, highlighting the ripple-effect nature of working in a network. Figure 5 shows Reimagine Learning’s “threads of influence,” tracing the evolution of ideas and activities through the network—not to prove causality but to connect the stories we have heard and to shine a light on the emergent and unpredictable impact of network building.

Reimagine Learning was a network purpose-built to promote innovation and system-level spread of those innovations, and its measurement framework had to reflect that.

spread, adoption, or field building. (See figure 5, “Threads of Influence,” for examples and quotes, color-coded in the MEL framework.)
### Threads of Influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WE STARTED WITH:</th>
<th>WHICH TURNED INTO:</th>
<th>AND THEN:</th>
<th>AND THEN:</th>
<th>AND THEN:</th>
<th>WHICH GOT US:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A need to identify whom to serve and to better understand them</strong></td>
<td>Created description of “complex learner” (see “Knot” section)</td>
<td>Developed student processes, led to agreement on which students were “in scope”</td>
<td>Stated complex learner population; discovered that one out of four students in public education system could be defined as such</td>
<td>Reiter set alignment on collecting goal clarity on value of working together to reach this population data and tools to help the system move</td>
<td><strong>Adoption of “human learner”</strong> by other organizations e.g., Gates Foundation integrated language of vulnerable populations into new initiatives, based on IC’s testing analyses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pam Cantor’s (Turnaround for Children) vision for an integrated model to support the whole child**

- Launched working group and developed fortified environment prototype (see “Knot” section)
- Ellen Mor (New Teacher Center) integrated thinking into new last the Optimal Learning Environment
- Turnaround realized strategy based on the fortified environment; published new research, the coaching model of learning (Brooks Stafford [Brian])
- Pam Cantor and Todd Rosen harmonized the coaching model into new work with the Chan Zuckenberg Initiative on the science of learning and development

**A desire to “change the culture” around learning differences and learner variability**

- Heidi Bosper Geyer, started meeting with influencers and organizations in the entertainment industry, locating Geyer-Magazin John Legend, William Morris Endeavor, and Entertainment Industry Foundation
- Created a partnership with William Morris Endeavor
- After William Morris Endeavor acquired modeling agency IMG, Natural Learning Initiative on Fashion Week
- Fashion show from Hub/ School (designer’s sods by several statues, learning, and performance by John Legend, all in support of the network

**A need to build and cultivate a dense network of individuals and organizations**

- Began converting 20 organizations meeting three times per year
- Within 18 months, grew from 20-person conversions to 200; in 2016, named annual awards in support of the network, celebrated over two years, held 13 convenings in total
- To strengthen connections, launched communicative efforts, including network building, building the network from the Health and Learning series
- Grew from 528 network contacts in 2016 to more than 750 in 2018, over 300 unique and extended from the Health and Learning sessions

**An inclusive person backbone, a learning network, with a slate of targeted and people deeply engaged, according to 2017 network survey**

- Created “a support” for organizations to expand their work, new organization and research (e.g., Chief) to help entire school systems to support a highly variable learner population

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*Continued →*
### Threads of influence (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WE STARTED WITH</th>
<th>WHICH TURNED INTO</th>
<th>AND THEN:</th>
<th>AND THEN:</th>
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**Reimagine Learning** set three targets: ensure all students graduate at the college-ready level, raise the number of students who enter college, and increase the number of students who graduate from college. These targets were set to address the challenges faced by the nation’s schools, including low graduation rates, high dropout rates, and significant achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds.

**Identified policy as one of Reimagine Learning’s three levers for change.**

- **Create a policy working group, led by America Forward, to define K-12 policy priorities.**
- **Policy principles ratified by the network and the America Forward education working group.**
- **Convergent groups’ principles into a platform specifically focused on ESEA reauthorization.**
- **With ESEA and federal policy making toward new laws, created a partnership with ESSA Innovation Lab Network.**
- **Reimagine Learning produced “The Framework for Success” and a roadmap for implementing the recommendations of the Acceleration Academy’s report.**
- **A new for-profit organization, the Setting Time to Urban Education, was created to support implementation of recommendations in the Acceleration Academy’s report.**

**Intention to support Reimagine Learning organizations working together in a region.**

- **New Profit dedicated specific resources to pursuit regional impact.**
- **Searched for districts that had change agendas and infrastructural support.**
- **Lawrence Public Schools emerged as a candidate.**
- **Lawrence High School and the Lawrence High School Community Acceleration Academy, an institution responsible for much of the success of the district’s turnaround.**
- **A new for-profit organization, the Setting Time to Urban Education, was created to support implementation of recommendations in the Acceleration Academy’s report.**

**Salary is a significant issue for students.**

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**District Lead Teams** and **Teacher Support Teams** met monthly, action plan developed from various districts, how to better meet the needs of diverse learners, includes training for Reimagine Learning experts.

**New partnerships formed, e.g., SAB’s participation in the SAIC buying cooperative, in the “Paradigm Shift” into Efficient Learning.**

**Effective Communication is key to the success of the process.**

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**Effective Communication is key to the success of the process.**

**Effective Communication is key to the success of the process.**

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**Source:** Deloitte analysis.
Transform/transition
Assess the whole thing and why it matters.

In this phase, we examine the network and the issue area itself to understand what has worked, what hasn’t, and what the value of the network could be going forward. In some cases, the network may have accomplished its goals, so the participants decide to move on. In others, the issue itself may have shifted, or we find that the external environment has changed, in which case the network might want to shift its focus, membership, or structure in order to tackle the problem in new ways. This is where the cyclical nature of the aligned action life cycle becomes especially relevant, as evaluating what’s next often means discovering something new.

To know where to go, assess where you’ve been

If you were to take a snapshot of the US education system in 2019, you would still capture a persistent problem in action. But you would also capture a set of social impact leaders tackling this problem in integrated, aligned, and collaborative ways. In 2012, the fields of LEAD, SILLS, and trauma were still very niche. By the years since, we have seen an explosion of energy and activity around the “whole-child” SILLS and personalized learning, along with an increasing focus on trauma and the science of learning. These external changes, along with the formal name of the Reimagine Learning Fund, provide natural reflection and consideration.

Where does Reimagine Learning go from here?

At New Profit, Reimagine Learning, along with New Profit’s other education efforts, is evolving into a broader cradle-to-career strategy. We realized at New Profit we had inadvertently created silos: Reimagine Learning, reimagining school systems, early childhood, personalized learning, postsecondary. It was a case of the silo’s child having no choice,” Solow says. “We were perpetuating silos internally at the same time we were trying to end silos externally. So we’re moving toward thinking about the work we’re doing from a more integrated perspective. We’re not going up what was important to us in Reimagine Learning—the three buckets: our new population—but we’re asking, “What if we build on that?”

New Profit is now focusing on integration in education at three levels: across the education continuum (early childhood, K-12, postsecondary); between those “supplying” learning environments (schools, education, nonprofits) and those “receiving” them (students, families, communities), and across fields within education and youth development. They are doing this through three core competencies, as informed by many of the lessons they learned through Reimagine Learning and from others: supporting capacity-building, exploring the cutting edge of innovation, and continuing to find new and better ways to support partnerships and collaboration—all while maintaining a focus on equity and integrating communities in the work.

As Solow and Koch characterize it, the spirit of and lessons from Reimagine Learning influence this evolution: the importance of focusing on the whole child, the value of interactions in sparking innovation, the power of partnerships, the opportunity to diffuse learning across and through organizations. “The way I see it,” Koch says, “the work we started six years ago is evolving, becoming more relevant to this moment in time.”

As for the other Reimagine Learning organizations, they are working with them to bring the ideas and innovations from the “knowledge frontier” and, of course, the human and intellectual connections they built through working together. “We learned a whole lot,” Solow says. “The whole idea that you would sit at the table crafting with others was new for us. The foundation is better off because of it—and others we work with now are better because of what we learned through Reimagine Learning.”

“The whole idea that you would be at the table crafting with others was new for us. Both the foundation and others we work with now are better because of what we learned through Reimagine Learning.”

— Tracy Solow

It was a sentiment echoed by Ylvisaker: “To me, it’s a big step away from their own mindset and all others’ research, with excitement, belief, horror, trade
practices—that has been amazing. Our success in terms of the impact we’re having is evidence of what this network has achieved since we came into Reimagine Learning. It’s not because we’re doing work better internally. It’s because we’re taking practices we learned from Reimagine Learning and embedding them in our work. And I know we’re not the only ones, because I’ve worked closely with other Reimagine Learning partner organizations and seen it happen with them as well.” And as Reimagine Learning firmly focuses on its organizations and the young people, families, and educators they serve, if the policy changes the collective still prevails, in the relationships formed, and in the shifts that have gotten us that much closer to reimaging learning for all students.

Reimagine Learning was just one of many efforts in play at this time focused on shifting an entrenched system, but it was an effort that took a deliberate test to change minds of key leaders in that system, cozying Donella Meadows’s “playbook” for changing paradigms “How do you change paradigms?” You keep pointing at the anomalies and failures in the old paradigm; you keep speaking louder and with assurance from the new one, you insert people with the new paradigms in places of public visibility and power. You don’t waste time with meetings, rather, you work with active change agents and with the most middle ground of people who are open-minded.” This is precisely what Reimagine Learning came to understand: if the network could change the mindsets of the individuals operating in and around the existing system, begin to point out anomalies and failures, and provide assurance from a new way of thinking, it could slowly start to change the system.

Ultimately, working with and through networks requires the integration of three key dimensions that have become the building blocks of aligned action. An understanding of leverage dynamics—the people you need to build relationships and make them stick; an ability to craft collective strategy—to get smart about the problem and develop a point of view and plan to move to action; and to consider network configuration—designing and weaving a different kind of structure to support a group as it keeps its own path forward.

It is a way of working that defines command and control positioning, in which insights come from the collective—and connections among them rather than experts. It’s a journey on which there are no short cuts, and it will try the patience of those fed to short-termists. Yet it is an approach to problem solving that we hope continues to be tested and developed. For what persistent problem would not be better served by a collective working together in an aligned and coordinated way?

Reimagine Learning timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>New Profit and the Tower Foundation share a recognition that the status quo is insufficient to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Leaders look to create a community of funders and practitioners to support students with learning disabilities and social-emotional learning challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>The Oak Foundation and the Hewitt Family Foundation join as funders alongside the Tower Foundation and New Profit, originally creating a US$8 million, five-year fund. Six initial grants are funded US$1 million each to advance their work with diverse learners: AHF, Eye to Eye, New Classrooms, New Teacher Center, Peace First, and Turnaround for Children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Thirty-two participants convene to kick off the “Learning Differences and Social Emotional Learning” network, the initial name for Reimagine Learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Leaders further define the network’s target population and conduct a data analysis to understand the magnitude of that population, revealing that 44 to 59 percent of children in low-income families are complex learners and that 10 to 25 percent of all school-aged children are complex learners from low-income families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>The network takes the new name Reimagine Learning to capture the call to action that embedded the motivation of network members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Leaders develop a monitoring, evaluation, and learning framework to better understand the different dimensions of the network’s success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Reimagine Learning begins awarding one-year, US$100,000 innovation grants to continue fostering innovation and expand the number of organizations and types of work the network formally funds.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reimagine Learning announce its public launch at Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in partnership with venture capitalist John Eliyahu, generating US$5 million impressions for Reimagine Learning worldwide and US$1.5 million in additional funding for the network. |

Leaders launch the Practitioner’s working group, convening nonprofit practitioners from diverse organizations and the broader network to work together on key capacity-building challenges. |

The Ari and Melinda Gates Foundation joins as a core funder for the Reimagine Learning network. |

Reimagine Learning partners with superintendent Jeff Riley of Lawrence Public Schools, launching the network’s first regional initiative in Essex County, Massachusetts. |

New Profit’s nonpartisan policy arm America Forward secures key provisions on language regarding learning differences and personalized learning in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.
Methodology

HAVING PLAYED A role in the formation of the network, we approached the research and writing of this case study not as disinterested third-party evaluators but as effective practitioners. Our research agenda explored a range of areas and questions (Figure 6).

We interviewed 16 members of the Reimagine Learning Network: practitioners and leaders:
- John Balk, City Year
- Pamela Center, Turnaround for Children
- Bob Cunningham, Understand
- Jane Feinberg, formerly of New Profit
- David Fink, EYE to EYE
- Sharon Grundy, New Teacher Center
- Sarah Grof, formerly of New Profit
- Helane Jones, formerly of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- Vanessa Kirsch, New Profit
- Ellen Mair, formerly of New Teacher Center
- Ashley Mandvi, formerly of Power Family Foundation
- Tracy Sosnicki, Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation
- Mara Segal, ABDF
- Shrali Shroff, New Profit
- Glade Shorter, formerly of Turnaround for Children
- Janee Henry Wood, Turnaround Education, formerly of Teach For America

We document and architected the work of Reimagine Learning over the years of our involvement. We reviewed site files developed for convenings, working groups, interviews, analyses; these documents represent the vast body of knowledge and work the network generated.

To further our understanding of how the evolution of the Reimagine Learning network informed other efforts driving systems change, we drew on the Reimagine Learning impact report developed by New Profit, Monitor Institute, and Edubank, and a range of literatures around network theory and action.
Aligned action playbook

Select moves made by network facilitators (New Profit, Monitor Institute by Deloitte) to support the network, by phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Move</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>So what</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Convening</td>
<td>Gathered network participants in person (three times annually in the first three years, followed by one annually in following years). Attitudes varied based on network phase but generally included a mix of interest in learning, building and content sharing and creation.</td>
<td>Strengthened ties across the network, enabled connection in real time, and sparked further collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discover</td>
<td>Landscape mapping</td>
<td>Captured what was happening in the learning difference and social emotional learning fields, e.g., emerging solutions, social innovation, innovations as described in How Children Learn, as well as who was and should be part of our growing collaborative—e.g., “board” showing where the organizations work, population served, etc., graphical depiction of new strategies.</td>
<td>Confirmed the opportunity for aligned action on the innovation of learning differentials and social emotional learning and helped clarify how that group of people and organizations might move forward as a collective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know</td>
<td>Scenario planning</td>
<td>Identified key “emotional unlearning” that might affect the education landscape in the next 10 years and, through collaborative planning, identified a three-year window through which to play out these narratives in different possible futures (memorized).</td>
<td>Gave the network toward shared understanding of an oriented given possible futures, began to troubleshoot and integrate them to that problem and build collective identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leit</td>
<td>Working groups</td>
<td>Organized network members into working groups to address specific areas of opportunity, e.g., “Working through working groups,” which were supported by network facilitators.</td>
<td>Deepened participant investment in the network and provided catalytic to testing and scaling solutions, e.g., rapid prototyping, policy changes, and more (“mobilize” strategy).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leit</td>
<td>Site visits, student partners</td>
<td>During convenings, scheduled time to visit sites where network members were working with students, educators and parents to participate in convenings.</td>
<td>Made the work “touch” and helped incorporate a real-world lens into discussions and points of view as a network.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 6**

Research learning questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Motivations for joining the network</th>
<th>The process of developing a shared narrative for transformative learning</th>
<th>Defining moments for the network</th>
<th>Influence of the network on the member organisations</th>
<th>Measuring success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>- What did you join transformative learning initially, and what kept you coming back? - What experiences or opportunities did you identify in which coming together was more effective than working independently?</td>
<td>- What was the process like for you to develop a shared narrative for transformative learning? - Were there beliefs/perspectives that you had to give up or shift away from? - What did you gain during that process?</td>
<td>- What were some of the critical moments when things shifted in positive ways, e.g., action gained or commitments forged? - What were some of the biggest challenges for you personally?</td>
<td>- In what other ways did transformative learning affect your organization, and you? - View of change, if at all, your approach to partnerships or how your organization works? - How do your paradigms of “what it takes” to serve a complex learner change as a result of transformative learning? - What does it take to sustain that paradigm shift?</td>
<td>- What were some of the “incredible moments of success” (those success stories we can’t nearly use or measure) in the work over the year? - Review the work different today because of transformative learning? - Where did the network stumble or fail to reach its potential?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Deloitte analysis.
Select moves made by network facilitators (New Profit, Monitor Institute by Deloitte) to support the network, by phase (contd)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Move</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>So what</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knit</td>
<td>Flipbook</td>
<td>Developed a short, colorful flipbook describing the network's shared narrative for an external or unfamiliar audience.</td>
<td>Solidified the story of &quot;who we are&quot; as a network in an eye-catching format for current and potential members and other mission stakeholders—founders, policy makers, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knit</td>
<td>Student personas</td>
<td>Designed narrative portraits of different types of students the network could serve. Focus on grade level, gender, race, and socioeconomic status.</td>
<td>Helped students “see life” in new ways, allowing the network to make choices aligned with the needs of the students, and clarified the size of the population, helping make the case for the importance of serving these students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize</td>
<td>Social network analysis</td>
<td>Mapped connections across the network, depicted connections visually and shared with the network for discussion and action.</td>
<td>Served as a baseline for measuring network structure and health and the future; identified clusters of strong and weak connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize</td>
<td>Advisory board</td>
<td>Engaged key leaders and a subset of other leaders in the network (social entrepreneurs, thought leaders, policy influencers, etc.) to advise on the direction of our collective work.</td>
<td>Helped New Profit learning prioritize and focus, evaluate fit target populations (e.g., using insights such as the 2015 Grand Nation report to expand the student populations we aim to serve), shift focus (e.g., shifting from solving the needs of diverse learners to solving the problems schools face), and shape proposals to network engagement and impact measurements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize</td>
<td>Practitioner working groups</td>
<td>Convened practitioners (operating network groups) to work together on capacity-building challenges.</td>
<td>Helped practitioners move along the &quot;learning-to-capacity&quot; continuum (inclusivity, commitment, mindset) and offered perspectives on their organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grow</td>
<td>MEL framework</td>
<td>Adapted framework for monitoring, evaluation, and learning to track the network's progress over time, reflecting the network's specific purpose.</td>
<td>See the &quot;GROW&quot; section for details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grow</td>
<td>Regional impact strategy</td>
<td>Created high-level strategy for bringing the network to a place, including identifying key partners and stakeholders for collaboration with districts.</td>
<td>Launches impact into place, creating work that would ultimately work into work with Lawrence, Salem, and Essex County, Massachusetts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Service Deloitte analytics.

Endnotes

1. For more detail, see Deloitte. Alignment: Organizing for system change, June 24, 2013.
3. Raising Learning Network represents many breakthroughs: a breakthrough in how to think about whole-child development and recent education reform to reflect true understanding, a breakthrough in leveraging the power of a network to cocreate around and move toward shared goals and actions, and a breakthrough in New Profit's understanding of how to approach and measure systems-level change. To reflect on its impact, New Profit has chronicled the breakthrough story of Raising Learning Network that shares key outcomes and lessons learned within each of the four core areas of Raising Learning Network work: governance and capacity building, policy advocacy, network engagement, and regional initiatives. These stories are available on the New Profit website, https://www.newprofit.org/behindthescenes/raising-learning-network.  
4. Statistics on dropout rates (Table 142); reading proficiency (Table 146); math proficiency (Table 145); and bachelor’s degree attainment (Table 146) taken from Thomas D. Snyder and Sally A. Dillow, Digest of Education Statistics 2011, National Center for Education Statistics, December 2011.
6.”Achieve” is a Bloomberg initiative that provides technical assistance to help districts improve student achievement, increase graduation rates, and reduce dropout rates. It offers a free, online tools to help policy makers, school leaders, and educators do their jobs better. See www.bloomberg.com/achieve. For more information, see Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Adverse of Childhood Experiences (ACE) Score.”
7. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations come from interviews conducted by Monitor Institute by Deloitte for this case study in the fall of 2016. See “Vocabulary” for details.
9. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. See G鰐z, What is SEL?”
10. "The notion of "blown" comes from Stephen Cohen's book Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation (New York: Knopf, 2010); it is often used to describe ideas that come from gradually making small changes, rather than "rebuilding" moments.
11. New Profit.
Shifting a system

The Reimagine Learning network and how to tackle persistent problems

16. Ibid.
18. Grant, Transform: How to build a network to transform a system.
20. For a useful resource on social business planning for nonprofits, see: Diana Sbarra and Katherine Cohen, Who’s E? The Art of Scenario Making for Nonprofits (Global Social Network, 2006).
21. An understanding of osmoticities is an element in the monitoring, evaluation, and learning framework that we would eventually develop for the Reimagine Learning network. See the overview section for more information on how we think about network impact.
22. James Voorhies, as stated during November 2013 convening in Los Angeles.
23. The network agreed to focus initially on “school-aged complex learners living in low-income families”—children aged 5-17, from families with annual income of less than $50,000.
24. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).”
25. CASEL City Year, American Institute for Research (AIR), Communities in Schools, New Teacher Center, Harvard University, and K-12 Center for Research on Learning, “Learning to Learn.”
26. Developed from “Teacher teaching and learning environment: A progress” by developed by a Reimagine Learning working group.
27. Jim Sleeper, as stated during March 2014 convening in Washington, D.C.
30. Ibid.
32. Johnson, Where Good Men Come From.
33. Developed by New Profit.
34. New Profit.
35. Research for Action, in its memo “Reimagine Learning network survey analysis: Perspectives from participants,” defines formal collaboration as “organizations working together over time with a shared goal, through means such as building or developing shared programming, sharing funding, or collaborating to view awareness on an issue.”
40. This ME framework, adapted from CEO work, was developed specifically for Reimagine learning and its needs, goals, purposes, and configuration. The group identified important aspects to consider in the framework, such as trust and legitimacy, social capital, internal and external, the sector, and particularly, innovation learnings. These were important measures for this type of network focused on systems change, promoting innovation and a key set of ideas to the field.
41. For more detail on learning at scale and how Monitor Institute by Streisatz is thinking about measurement in the social sector, see Monitor Institute by Streisatz, “An innovative measurement at better change for monitoring, evaluation, and learning in the social sector, 2017.”
45. Woodrow, “Common sense.”
46. Ibid.
47. America’s Promise Alliance, 2013 doubling a child labor report, October 4, 2016.
About the authors

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About the Monitor Institute by Deloitte

Monitor Institute by Deloitte works with innovative leaders to surface and spread best practices in public problem-solving and to pioneer new practices—breakthrough approaches for addressing societal challenges.

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