



## NETWORKS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: LEARNING FROM THE FIELD

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### BACKGROUND

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been working in U.S. education since 2000, and the driving force behind that work is the belief that every person should have the chance to live a healthy and productive life. We focus on education because a high-quality public education is a bridge to opportunity in this country – particularly when it comes to getting started on a career path or getting a good job, being socially and economically mobile, and being able to grow personally and contribute to our communities.

The foundation recently completed a process to refine our strategy for supporting K-12 education with a focus on improving outcomes for Black, Latino, and low-income students. This has been a comprehensive process—we’ve taken a hard look at what we’ve learned from the field, analyzed results from past efforts, and explored where future opportunities lie.

### LEARNING FROM THE FIELD

We’ve learned a lot about the challenges of improving student outcomes. We’ve learned from research as well as lessons from the field that excellent schools—led by leaders who focus on Continuous Improvement grounded in data and evidence— help students succeed.

Our next chapter of investments will be driven by a direct focus on schools—where the action of teaching and learning happens.

*Networks for School Improvement (NSI) are focused on improving student outcomes. The Gates Foundation defines an NSI as a group of secondary schools that work in partnership with an Intermediary organization to use a Continuous Improvement process to significantly increase the number of Black, Latino, and low-income students who earn a high school diploma, enroll in a postsecondary institution, and are on track in their first year to earn a credential with labor-market value. Secondary school teams work collaboratively to identify, test, and refine solutions that target a problem and reach goals common across the network. An NSI’s goal, or aim, is to improve outcomes that are predictive of high school graduation and postsecondary success.*

Last fall, we issued a Request for Information (RFI) to learn from organizations about how their efforts to work with networks of schools could inform the foundation’s Networks for School Improvement. We were interested in hearing from organizations that used **Continuous Improvement** methods to improve postsecondary outcomes for Black, Latino, and low-income students, in particular.

Through the RFI, we hoped to hear and learn from organizations with experience and insights in networks. We also hoped to hear from potential partners we have never funded before. We are encouraged by the results.

We received 278 RFI responses from 41 states; 60 percent of those responding had no prior funding relationship with the foundation's K12 program. The RFI process expanded our knowledge of work happening in the field, and of different approaches, challenges, and solutions that districts and organizations have worked through.

Drawing on what we learned from the RFI responses, the foundation issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to identify Networks for School Improvement. This open and competitive process began **January 8, 2018** and will close **February 21, 2018**.

Through the RFP, we seek organizations to act as Intermediaries, which support networks of schools to use data to identify, test, and refine strategies that ensure students are on course to graduate from high school, enroll in a post-secondary institute, and earn a credential with labor market value. More information about the RFP can be found at [k12education.gatesfoundation.org](http://k12education.gatesfoundation.org).

We are immensely grateful to those who took the time to respond to the RFI, as the input helped shape the RFP. Below we share more of what we learned from the RFI feedback.

## **KEY TAKE-AWAYS**

Responses to our RFI confirmed that the field has experience and expertise aligned to many aspects of our NSI strategy. There is also a deep pool of potential partners seeking to build their capacity to do this work. The RFI responses point to eight key takeaways related to creating and supporting successful Networks for School Improvement (NSI). Potential grant-seekers will see these takeaways reflected in our [glossary](#) and in many of the questions in our current RFP.

## **CONTEXT**

### **• SCHOOL BUY-IN**

Respondents shared that schools may opt to participate in networks for many different reasons, including to address a federal, state, or district accountability-related mandate, to participate in a funder-driven initiative, and/or to participate in a larger convening.

We heard clearly that **involving schools early in the process of forming a network is crucial to the network's success**. Networks succeed when they deeply involve school teams (principals and teacher leaders) that want to participate, share an understanding of the problems to be addressed through the network, have identified a specific need as evidenced by data, and are eager to implement new strategies to solve problems.

### **• COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL COMMUNITY PARTNERS**

Several respondents discussed the importance of engaging out-of-school stakeholders, as well as the district or CMO central office, to build understanding and support for the network and to access relevant expertise from other sectors. Some respondents emphasized the value of culturally-sensitive approaches that originated in student identity and language acquisition challenges within their community. For example, to build connections with Latino students, one respondent involved Culture and Language Development teachers in the network. Some networks engaged cross-school teams (e.g., members of the schools' feeder patterns) or higher education partners. Others involved union representatives or formed district-level networks to consider the system-wide conditions that enable schools to be successful.

Our takeaway from this is that **a key function of NSIs will be to provide the space for schools to leverage the strengths unique to their local communities**, and we were humbled and excited by the great work already being done in this area.

In the RFP, we will look for evidence of Intermediaries' ability to successfully operate NSIs in the places they wish to work.

### • **ROLE OF THE DISTRICT OR CHARTER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION (CMO)**

Most of the Intermediaries who have led Networks for School Improvement for years identified a major role for the district or charter management organization (CMO). As the sponsor of the work, **the district or CMO was described as well-positioned to be an enabling partner that could remove barriers to school participation** (i.e. time, flexibility from system-wide mandates), provide access to data and support for working with data, and supply technical assistance in the start-up phase of the network.

### **STRUCTURE**

#### • **TEAM COMPOSITION**

Team composition reported across respondents generally included school/district-level leadership for each school (e.g., central office staff, principal, assistant principal), teachers and support staff/specialists such as counselors (specific to problem of practice). Most respondents indicated that having a dedicated data specialist at the school or district is essential.

In our RFP, we will look for **engagement and support across all levels of leadership in network schools**, from instructional leaders to students. You can read more about [school teams in our RFP glossary](#).

#### • **DIVERSITY OF NETWORK SIZE AND SUPPORTS**

Most Networks for School Improvement formed because schools had pre-existing relationships or were clustered together by their district or CMO. While we defined a network to include more than 20 schools, respondents indicated that large networks of schools are not the norm.

We also learned about the supports that many different types of network models provide, such as

professional development or training on Continuous Improvement, monthly or quarterly in-person network convenings, virtual connections through conference calls/webinars, individual coaching, data check-ins and data analysis/support, site visits, curated resources, and sharing of best practices. Examples of network models included role-alike affiliation organizations and networked improvement communities.

Because the NSIs we envision could be up to 40 schools and require more intensive support than appear to be the norm, **we anticipate providing technical assistance to Intermediaries to supplement their skills in supporting large groups of schools**. For the same reason, **our Type 2 grants permit Intermediaries to grow their capacity with smaller, shorter investments in promising networks comprising 10+ schools**.

### **CONTENT**

#### • **AIM STATEMENTS**

An aim statement is a specific and measurable goal that the network commits to accomplish by a specific date. An aim statement focuses the network's improvement efforts and provides a specific and measurable goal for the network's collective action.

A few RFI respondents conducted detailed benchmarking of student outcomes and set their network's targets against the benchmarks. One RFI respondent noted that they look at state data and craft aim statements accordingly. The aim might be to "increase by x the number of students who..." Then schools identified by that analysis are invited to participate in the network and to decide the actual quantitative targets for their own school.

A handful of other RFI respondents incorporate district goals when creating their school and network targets; others provide time early in the formation of the network for school leadership teams to set school-level targets around student outcomes.

Based on what we have learned, there appears to be a role the foundation can play to provide third-party advice and support to Intermediaries, in later stages of the application process, to create a specific, measurable, and time-bound aim with their school partners. As a result, **we are not requiring applicants to give a specific and time-bound NSI aim statement in their initial RFP application.**

#### • CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT MUST BE RELEVANT AND VALUABLE

Several RFI responses called out the need to ensure that Continuous Improvement is not overly technical and is perceived as valuable by the schools in a network. These respondents counseled that the Continuous Improvement process must fall within the current work and construct of the school and be relevant to the schools' goals.

We also heard about 87 different Continuous Improvement models respondents were using in the field. To help RFP applicants assess whether their preferred model would fit NSI-type work, **we have provided a clear definition of Continuous Improvement in our RFP glossary.**

#### • FIFTEEN MOST CITED CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT MODELS AND ORGANIZATION

Our foundation defines **Continuous Improvement (CI)** as a process for understanding a specific problem of practice and addressing it by developing, testing, and refining promising solutions. In responding to questions about continuous improvement, RFI respondents most frequently noted familiarity with the following fifteen models or organizations (listed alphabetically):

- o Action Research
- o Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
- o Collective Impact
- o Community of Practice
- o Cycles of Inquiry
- o Data Wise

- o Institute for Healthcare Improvement
- o Kaizen
- o Model for Improvement/Plan Do Study Act (PDSA)
- o Professional Learning Communities
- o Proprietary
- o Results-Based Accountability
- o Six Sigma
- o StriveTogether

Some of the approaches we heard about fulfill our **definition of CI** and some fulfill only some elements of that definition. For example, we found it hard to tease out evidence of **root cause analysis** in many models, including Professional Learning Communities and Communities of Practice. We learned that **we cannot say whether models align with our understanding of CI without details of the specific steps Intermediaries took, for example, to analyze root causes, set a numeric Aim Statement, identify strategies to be tested and refine those tests in short cycles.** We are therefore asking more specific questions about these aspects of CI during our current grant-making cycle.

#### **GUIDANCE FOR RFP APPLICANTS**

The information shared with us through the RFI enriched our understanding of the improvement work in the field and we appreciated hearing from organizations across the country to help inform our efforts and thinking. Using what we heard from the respondents, we have structured the RFP in line with the following expectations for RFP applicants:

#### • FOCUS ON EQUITY

Few RFI respondents focused on a problem of practice that would improve outcomes specifically for Black, Latino, and low-income students. Given our foundation's commitment to improving outcomes for those students, we expect that RFP responses will demonstrate a clear commitment to equity. We hope to see teams engaged in Continuous Improvement in service of producing equitable student outcomes;

Ultimately, we hope that Intermediaries facilitate NSIs to examine traditional decision-making structures to address structural biases that can disadvantage Black, Latino and low-income students. We will also be eager to hear from Intermediaries that have invested in developing the diversity of their own workforce and leadership team.

#### • FOCUS ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

We expect to see a clear focus on improving outcomes for Black, Latino, and low-income students—specifically, a set of **outcomes supported by research** that is predictive of high school graduation and post-secondary success. **We expect networks to track student data that directly relate to their aim statement**, and we will continue to work with Intermediaries to investigate ways to reduce the cost of safely and securely accessing data for Continuous Improvement.

#### • IMPORTANCE OF A COMMON THEORY OF IMPROVEMENT

A theory of improvement is a shared understanding by the members of an NSI of how to reach the **Aim**. A shared theory of improvement is informed by research and practice and helps networks of schools focus their collective efforts and enables them to learn from each other's work. **We expect networks to have a shared theory of improvement and for Intermediaries to have a clear plan for managing the divergent needs of the schools in their network**, shoring up collective learning, and ensuring cost efficiency and sustainability across a potentially evolving scope of work.

#### • SCHOOL LEVEL FOCUS

The network approach recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to school improvement. School leaders, including principals and teachers, are in the best position to know how to support their students and **we expect NSI “start-up” to include a school-level analysis of the root cause of the student outcome problem, based on data, evidence**

**and key stakeholder opinion, before Intermediaries begin supporting schools in identifying and implementing suitable interventions. Analyses of the root cause of a student outcome problem should consider multiple data points.**

#### • IMPROVEMENT CYCLES

From the RFI responses, we learned that the type and duration of **inquiry cycles** varies greatly from network to network. Instead of revolving around annual data reviews, such as state assessments of student achievement, **successful data cycles are formative, and the duration of the cycle matches the problem of practice**. For example, one RFI respondent, dealing with an instructionally-focused problem of practice, promoted the use of daily classroom data. Another respondent, focused on increasing postsecondary enrollment, reviewed FAFSA completion data weekly.

#### • COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Some RFI respondents shared generously about what they still need to learn to be high-performing Intermediaries. Through our RFP, **we will seek Intermediaries who can identify their own growth areas and are open to collaboration with colleagues and other partners**. They will be invited to network with other Intermediaries who have similar needs and interests to learn from each other in a foundation-funded Community of Practice.

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We owe a debt of gratitude to colleagues across the country for the time and effort they took to offer their RFI responses. The information and insights provided through these RFI responses inform not only how the foundation thinks about the RFP selection process, but also how we can provide technical assistance and support to our network partners once they are selected.

In each of the above areas, there are ways the foundation can support opportunities for

Intermediaries and networks to become stronger through collaboration, available research, and external expertise. Areas for support could include creating deeper knowledge management functions, connecting Intermediaries to the latest equity research, or building further facility with Continuous Improvement.

If you are interested in learning more about the RFP, please refer to the [K-12 website](#). You can also email the K-12 team at:

[K-12SchoolNetworkRFI@gatesfoundation.org](mailto:K-12SchoolNetworkRFI@gatesfoundation.org)



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