



Deeper Learning and Diffusion of Scaled Impact Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

The goal of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation’s Deeper Learning + Diffusion of Innovation and Scaled Impact Initiative (DL+D), launched in 2018, was to generate knowledge about how fundamental shifts in teaching and learning could be scaled within public school systems efficiently, expediently, and equitably. The foundation funded 10 research-practice partnerships (RPPs) to accelerate educational improvement and facilitate learning. The initiative Request for Proposals (RFP) defined an ambitious scaling goal: going from 15% to 80% of target users in 3 years. Hewlett extended this timeline for many of the RPPs, however, in part because the global COVID-19 pandemic emerged during the second full school year of the grant period, disrupting and delaying the work. In early 2021, the foundation contracted with SRI Education to conduct a retrospective evaluation of the initiative. This report summarizes the progress the RPPs made and how the grant structures and supports facilitated or inhibited this progress. Lessons learned about scaling for equity are summarized in the accompanying brief, [*Scaling Deeper Learning for Equity: Lessons Learned from the Deeper Learning + Diffusion and Scaled Impact Initiative*](#).

Initiative Grantees

The 10 RPPs varied in the number of organizations involved and the extent to which they had a history of working together. Each RPP had to include a research partner and a school system, and some also included a technical assistance provider. The school system partners ranged from large urban districts to a consortium of rural districts, although most RPPs involved a single large district.

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

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

Progress Scaling Deeper Learning

For all but a few RPPs, the DL+D initiative was marked by slow initial progress due to a variety of factors related to low district readiness and lack of understanding of district context.

Although all four RPPs that scaled a specific instructional practice reported evidence of spread, the initiative resulted in limited systematic data on the depth of implementation or the impact on student outcomes.

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

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

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

Grantee Feedback on Initiative Structures and Supports

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

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

Respondents valued the RPP structure, but the initiative’s lack of focus on continuous improvement seemed like a missed opportunity to some. In terms of the initiative supports,

practitioners appreciated the initiative learning community but thought its value was constrained by the diversity of grantees' goals and contexts.

Implications for Funders

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

Fund a planning period to ensure understanding of local context.

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

Co-design timelines and goals with grantees

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

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

Making sense of progress across an initiative is challenging when the grantees differ on multiple dimensions, including goals, lead organization type (e.g., nonprofit technical assistance provider or university-based research center), school level (e.g., elementary or secondary), number of school district partners, and role positionality of the school district representatives (e.g., district superintendent versus head of a small department within a district). In DL+D, the grantee goals alone ranged from scaling project-based learning, to shifting educator mindsets, to improving accountability systems. This variation constrained the generalizable learning from the initiative. In addition, grantees found that diversity on so many dimensions reduced the usefulness of the

facilitated learning community. For initiatives with common learning agendas, it may be beneficial to ensure commonality on at least one (if not more) dimension.

Consider the factors that make RPPs the right strategy

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

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

Initiative Overview

The goal of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation’s (Hewlett) Deeper Learning + Diffusion of Innovation and Scaled Impact Initiative (DL+D initiative), launched in 2018, was to generate knowledge about how fundamental shifts in teaching and learning could be scaled within public school systems efficiently, expediently, and equitably. The initiative aimed “to develop empirically-driven, practical approaches to get from proof points of deeper learning practices to equitable and scaled impact.”¹ To help generate new knowledge about scaling deeper learning equitably, Hewlett funded 10 research-practice partnerships (RPPs), intentionally organized collaborations that leverage diverse expertise to accelerate educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research.² Hewlett also funded the Carnegie

Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Carnegie) to facilitate a cross-RPP learning community. Hewlett initially funded the RPPs for 3 years, though this timeline was extended for many of the RPPs. The global COVID-19 pandemic prompted schools to shift to emergency distance learning partway through the second full school year of the grant period, disrupting and delaying the work of the RPPs.

This report provides the findings from a retrospective evaluation of the DL+D initiative. The report first provides an overview of funded RPPs, followed by summaries of the progress made by the RPPs in scaling deeper learning and feedback from the RPPs about how the grant was structured. We conclude with implications for funders.

Deeper Learning Competencies

Research-practice partnerships could choose the deeper learning practices to scale as long as these focal practices targeted at least two of the following deeper learning competencies:

- Mastering rigorous academic content (*required*)
- Thinking critically/problem-solving
- Working collaboratively
- Communicating effectively
- Learning how to learn
- Developing and maintaining an academic learning mindset

¹ Hewlett Foundation. (2017). Deeper learning + diffusion of scaled impact. Concept paper + request for letters of interest.

² Farrell, C. C., Penuel, W. R., Coburn, C., Daniel, J., & Steup, L. (2021). Research-practice partnerships in education: The state of the field. William T. Grant Foundation.

Initiative Evaluation

In early 2021, Hewlett contracted with SRI Education to conduct a retrospective evaluation of the initiative to address the following research questions:

- (1) How much progress did the RPPs make scaling their target deeper learning practices?
- (2) What lessons about scaling deeper learning practices for equity emerged from the experiences of the 10 RPPs?
- (3) How did the grant structure and supports, including being part of a learning community, facilitate or inhibit RPPs in meeting their goals?

The evaluation relied primarily on a review of each RPP's grant documents, including the original proposal to Hewlett, annual progress reports, and (for all but two RPPs) the final grant report to Hewlett.³ We also collected information on presentations, journal articles, and other summaries the RPPs prepared on their work, including a final evaluation report from one RPP. This document review was supplemented by interviews with RPP members (at least one researcher and one practitioner from each RPP), conducted in summer 2021, in addition to follow-up interviews in summer 2022 for grantees with extended timelines. In total, we conducted 14 interviews with school system staff, 16 with researchers, and 8 with representatives from technical assistance (TA) organizations. We also interviewed three Carnegie staff members involved in facilitating the cross-RPP learning community.

Lessons Learned: Scaling for Equity

Our accompanying research brief, [*Scaling Deeper Learning for Equity: Lessons Learned from the Deeper Learning + Diffusion and Scaled Impact Initiative*](#), identifies six key lessons learned from across the DL+D initiative:

- Begin with a clear vision for equity and prioritize it during all stages of the work.
- Take an honest assessment of your district's norms and culture.
- Invest in all levels of the system.
- Engage multiple departments to ensure coherence and sustainability.
- Tailor your scaling strategy to the power dynamics in your district.
- Balance instructional guidance with professional autonomy.

³ The final reports for the DIG Deeper and Transformative Student Voice RPPs were not yet available at the writing of this report.

Initiative Grantees

The funded RPPs varied in terms of the partners involved and the deeper learning practices they targeted, how they defined and addressed equity, and the supports they provided to leaders and teachers. Two RPPs had significant funding from other sources with no clear delineation between Hewlett-supported activities and more general RPP activities.

RPP Partners

Each RPP had to include a research partner and a school system, but there was no limit on the number of partner organizations. The 10 RPPs varied in the number of organizations involved, their history working together, and the number and type of school systems involved.

Hewlett funded a mix of established and new RPPs, many of which involve large urban school districts, and the majority were led by a research organization.

Many of the RPPs were new research partnerships, even if the school system had previously worked with one of the partner organizations. The school system partners ranged from large urban districts to a consortium of rural districts, although most RPPs involved a single large district (e.g., Denver Public Schools, Broward County Public Schools, Anaheim High School District) (Exhibit 1). For all but two RPPs, the research partner was based at a university. In half of the RPPs, the research partner also provided implementation support (i.e., there was no additional TA partner) while the other five RPPs included both a research partner and a separate organization that provided technical assistance and implementation support. In each RPP, a lead organization had fiduciary responsibility for the grant and was responsible for reporting to Hewlett. A research organization took this lead role in six RPPs, and the other four RPPs had a TA partner as the lead. In no cases was a school system the lead organization.

Exhibit 1. Main Partners in Each Research-Practice Partnership

| Research-Practice Partnership | Main Partners ^a |
|--|--|
| HQPBL project (High Quality Project-Based Learning) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>PBLWorks</i> • Manchester School District (New Hampshire) • Pearl City-Waipahu Complex Area 9 (Hawaii) • Education Northwest* |
| iHub (Inquiry Hub) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>University of Colorado Boulder*</i> • Denver Public Schools |
| OCERA (Oklahoma City Education Research Alliance) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Generation Citizen</i> • Oklahoma City Public Schools • Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)* |
| Transformative Student Voice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>CU Engage at the University of Colorado Boulder*</i> • University of Colorado Denver* • Rowan University* • Denver Public Schools |
| Berkeley-Hayward Partnership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>UC Berkeley Graduation School of Education*</i> • Hayward Unified School District |
| DIG Deeper | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Outlier Research and Evaluation, University of Chicago*</i> • Broward County Public Schools |
| Leadership and Change Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Colorado Education Initiative</i> • Colorado Springs School District (D11) • Center for Reinventing Public Education* |
| Reflective Practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Inflexion*</i> • Anaheim Unified High School District |
| Best for the Future | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Jobs for the Future*</i> • New Hampshire Learning Initiative • Four New Hampshire school districts |
| S-CAP (Student-Centered Accountability Project) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Batelle for Kids</i> • Colorado Rural Education Collaborative districts • Generation Schools Network • University of Colorado-Denver Center for Practice Engaged Research* |

Note: Lead organization is italicized.

^a Some RPPs initially involved additional partners.

* Research partner

Deeper Learning Practices

The deeper learning practices selected varied substantially across RPPs, and some RPPs shifted strategies over the course of the initiative.

Four RPPs worked to scale specific deeper learning instructional practices in school systems, while the others focused on building leadership capacity for change management or improving accountability systems and measurement of deeper learning competencies.

The final focal practices ranged from specific instructional strategies to efforts to build mindsets and leadership capacity to broader shifts in accountability systems (Exhibit 2).

- **Four RPPs focused on scaling a version of project-based learning.** These RPPs were: High Quality Project-Based Learning, which supported teachers in developing project-based learning units; iHub, which supported high school teachers in enacting phenomenon-based learning in science guided by RPP-developed curricula; and the OCERA and Transformative Student Voice RPPs, which targeted versions of collaborative project-based learning or action civics for middle and/or secondary school students.
- **Four RPPs focused on building leadership capacity to lead change and/or shifting mindsets.** These RPPs included: the Berkeley-Hayward Partnership, which sought to build the instructional improvement capacity of district and school leaders; DIG Deeper, which focused on shifting elementary school teachers' mindsets about students' readiness to think critically as a strategy for instructional change; Leadership and Change Management, which focused on building school and district leaders' mindsets and their capacity to manage transitioning to more student-centered instruction; and Reflective Practice, which led school leadership teams through a visioning process to foster reflection and clarify their school's identity related to deeper learning competencies.
- **Two RPPs focused on alternative accountability systems or measurement of deeper learning competencies.** These RPPs were: Best for the Future, which developed rubrics and toolkits by grade span (elementary, middle, and high) for specific deeper learning competencies; and the S-CAP, a consortium of rural districts in Colorado that validated and scaled an accountability system designed to encourage deeper learning.

As with the focal practice, the RPPs varied in how they defined and addressed equity in their work.

Exhibit 2. Deeper Learning Practices Selected

| Research-Practice Partnership | Deeper Learning Practice |
|--|--|
| Scale a version of project-based learning (PBL) | |
| HQPBL project | Scale Gold Standard PBL, a set of design and teaching practices, across all grade levels and subject areas in two partner school systems in New Hampshire and Hawaii. |
| iHub | Diffuse culturally relevant, phenomenon-based science teaching in Denver Public Schools through co-designed high school chemistry and biology curricula. |
| OCERA | Diffuse deeper learning practices by implementing collaborative PBL, an inquiry-based active social studies pedagogy, in 7th grade and Action Civics in 12th grade, in Oklahoma City Public Schools. |
| Transformative Student Voice | Diffuse youth participatory action research in Denver Public Schools through a stand-alone course and by integrating it into humanities classes. |
| Build leadership capacity and/or shift mindsets | |
| Berkeley-Hayward Partnership^a | Build instructional improvement capacity of school-based instructional leadership teams and district and school leaders through co-design and continuous improvement processes in Hayward Unified School District (California). |
| DIG Deeper | Bring about the equitable spread of mindsets and teaching practices that support Broward County Public Schools (Florida) students' engagement in deeper learning through critical thinking. |
| Leadership and Change Management | Build mindsets and capacity of school and district leaders to manage shifts to more student-centered instruction in Colorado Springs School District 11. |
| Reflective Practice | Foster a school culture centering creativity, collaboration, communication, critical thinking and character/compassion by guiding leadership teams in Anaheim High School District (California) through a reflective school envisioning process. |
| Improve measurement or accountability systems | |
| Best for the Future | Create toolkits and rubrics defining four skills (self-direction, collaboration, communication, and creative thinking), with the eventual goal to incorporate assessment of these skills into New Hampshire's alternative accountability assessment system. |
| S-CAP | Refine, validate, and expand an alternative peer accountability system that considers curriculum and instruction, professional learning, vision and leadership, learning climate, resources allocation, and connection to families and communities in rural districts in Colorado. |

^aThe Berkeley-Hayward Partnership modified its focus each year in response to district needs.

The DL+D Initiative left it up to each RPP to define and address equity based on local context and needs, resulting in a range of strategies.

The DL+D RFP highlighted the need to scale in a manner that reached students farthest from opportunity, leaving it to each applicant RPP to define “farthest from opportunity.” The RPPs attended to equity in different ways. All RPPs partnered with districts that serve a high proportion of students of color or students from low-income backgrounds; for some, this was their main equity strategy. To a certain extent, how RPPs attended to equity aligned with the type of deeper learning practice they were scaling.

- **Equitable spread:** The RPPs that targeted a specific teaching practice related to project-based learning tended to focus on equitable spread. For example, one RPP defined students farthest from opportunity as students in poverty, English Learners, and students receiving special education services, and tracked the extent to which these student groups experienced project-based learning. This RPP developed scaling maps that prioritized schools with a high proportion of students farthest from opportunity in rolling out supports. RPPs scaling a version of project-based learning additionally sought to create more equitable teaching practices by allowing for student choice and voice in the curriculum.
- **Co-design:** The RPPs focused on building leadership capacity, and shifting mindsets tended to conceive of equity in terms of co-design (i.e., voice at the practitioner level) and by building equity into the continuous improvement processes they were asking school leaders to implement (i.e., encouraging school leaders to look at disaggregated student data as part of their improvement cycles).
- **Whole-child focus:** The measurement and accountability RPPs saw equity as integral to broadening success metrics and accounting for the whole child. For example, S-CAP attended to equity by taking a more comprehensive approach to defining and measuring student success.

Reflecting the diversity in how they defined and approached equity in their work, the RPPs varied in whether or not they established and tracked equity measures. They also varied in the types and level of direct support they provided to leaders and teachers.

Progress in Scaling Deeper Learning

To consider the progress the RPPs made in scaling their focal practices, we rely on Cynthia Coburn’s seminal conceptualization of scale as having four dimensions: spread, depth, sustainability, and ownership.⁴ For a teaching practice, spread is defined as the practice—as well as the beliefs, norms, and principles that underly it—reaching greater numbers of teachers or classrooms. In this way, it is related to depth, which Coburn defines as making deep and consequential changes to classroom practice that go beyond surface structures or procedures, and thus involve changes to teachers’ beliefs about how students learn. Sustainability is the continuation of a practice over time, and thus relies on ownership, which depends on the authority and knowledge for a practice being held by the educators who can sustain, deepen, and spread the work.

We first consider the progress of the RPPs in launching their partnerships and the impact of the pandemic before considering progress related to spread and depth, followed by sustainability and ownership.

The DL+D initiative was marked by slow initial progress for all but a few RPPs due to a variety of factors related to a lack of understanding of district context and low district readiness.

Once funded, several projects found that they did not have all the right people on board to drive change in a district. For example, in one RPP a key district leader was not invested in the work, delaying the establishment of the RPP’s subcontract between the university and the district as well as the planned data collection. Moreover, district leadership engagement in the work was not necessarily sufficient to drive change even where it did exist. For example, despite the engagement of the superintendent, one RPP struggled to gain traction with its initial approach because of competing initiatives in the district and strong site-level autonomy. Further, the RPPs were not immune to high turnover rates in district leadership even if they started with engaged leadership. During the initiative, the superintendent turned over in 6 out of the 8 urban districts (more than once in some districts), requiring RPPs to start over in gaining superintendent support and in some cases forcing RPPs to redesign their approach to align with new district priorities.

Other RPPs found that their original plan did not make sense once they started the work. Together, all these factors meant that the work of many of the RPPs started more slowly than anticipated, and several RPPs modified their approach even before the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, all but two RPPs extended their work through the 2021–22 school year or later.

⁴ Coburn, C. E. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher*, 32(6), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032006003>

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in delayed implementation for many RPPs and caused several to change strategies.

The onset of the pandemic in spring 2020 meant that school systems were in crisis and had little ability to focus on other priorities, including instructional improvement or data collection, though in a few cases the disruption provided small openings for change. The pandemic paused the work of many RPPs, as district partners scrambled to set up virtual learning, and altered the work of others. Some RPPs made temporary shifts to support school systems through the crisis. For example, iHub adapted their biology curriculum for remote learning, and Best for the Future completed some initial development of the self-direction toolkit development before bringing it to the teacher leaders to finalize so that teachers could focus on transitioning to online instruction. Other RPPs made more fundamental shifts in direction. Perhaps most dramatically, the Berkeley-Hayward partnership shifted from building leadership capacity for continuous improvement to helping the district articulate and respond to five urgencies related to the pandemic.

Although in most cases the pandemic disrupted and slowed the work, it did provide openings for deeper learning practices to gain traction in some cases. For example, one research partner described how the sense of urgency created by the pandemic made teachers more open to accepting guidance: *“There was more openness during this time in this district to there actually being something from the top. It wasn’t perceived as controlling. It was perceived as very welcome guidance in the midst of this crisis.”* A TA provider for another RPP described how the sense of crisis among leadership in the partner district meant that school leaders were more willing to try new practices. She noted how school leaders, *“were really able to create the time and clear the deck, basically, so that teachers would be able to do this and that there wasn’t any site level barrier to getting it done.”* A TA provider with an RPP that was focused on building leadership capacity (including data use) commented on how the pandemic revealed the need for their approach:

[O]ur perception is that schools where that work was a part of their teaching and learning fared better. They had better information about where students were at. Schools that realized that they were lacking and that felt like they were more in the dark when COVID happened, I think some of those schools realized, ‘if we were doing this, this would have given us some information.’ For some schools that weren’t doing it otherwise, they saw some interest [from their staff] because there is untapped opportunity in that kind of instructional model.

Despite the false starts and pandemic-related delays, many of the RPPs made progress scaling the focal practices, though both the grant structure and pandemic-related data collection challenges mean that systematically documenting this progress is a challenge.

Spread and Depth

The DL+D RFP laid out the expectation that RPPs would measure spread in terms of behavior change, such as use of new instructional practices, or other expected impacts; most RPPs also proposed tracking participation in professional development and some planned to examine student outcomes. In practice, the pandemic challenged both RPP's scaling plans and data collection. Further, the variation in the deeper learning practices and the paucity of implementation and outcomes data from the initiative make it difficult to systematically summarize the progress RPPs made in scaling deeper learning across the partner school districts. The RPPs contributed to the knowledge base about deeper learning practices in a variety of ways, however, and some were able to collect and analyze data on teacher practice and student outcomes.

The majority of RPPs provided both leadership and teacher supports, however only a subset reported systematic data on the reach of these supports.

The RPPs provided professional development to district and school leaders as well as teachers to support uptake of the focal practices, with many offering supports at both the leadership and teacher level. Leadership supports were designed to build the instructional leadership capacity of school or district leaders aligned to the deeper learning practice. The four RPPs that focused on scaling a version of project-based learning included an emphasis on teacher supports while the other RPPs (with the exception of Dig Deeper) had a greater emphasis on leadership supports.

Not all of the RPPs provided a clear picture of the reach of these supports, as measured by number of leaders or teachers participating. All four of the RPPs that focused on scaling a version of project-based learning, however, reported on some program implementation measure such as number of teachers trained. These PBL-focused RPPs provided professional development and support to a high proportion of targeted educators despite the disruption of the pandemic. For example, one RPP delivered almost all planned training and support before April 2020, with over 1,200 educators in the partner districts participating in initial professional development and approximately 60% of educators completing the full professional development sequence.

The other six RPPs were primarily focused on either systems-level change or shifting mindsets as a strategy for catalyzing deeper learning instructional practices. At the time of our analysis, only two of these RPPs provided systematic data on program implementation and participation, and these data were very high level. For example, one RPP reported that 93% of students were enrolled in a school that received some support associated with the grant, reflecting all but three schools and just over 21,000 students. The supports constituted part of each RPP's strategy for scaling deeper learning.

Although the RPPs that focused on a concrete instructional practice reported evidence of spread, the initiative resulted in limited systematic data on the depth of implementation or the impact on student outcomes.

The DL+D initiative emphasized research through the RPP requirement, which included a research partner, but applicants were not required to have an evaluation, and evaluation work is not typical of RPPs.⁵ Although RPPs can conduct summative research that engages practitioners, the DL+D RPPs devoted more energy to research-informed co-design and (to a lesser extent) continuous improvement than they did to summative research. The focus on process over summative evaluation means that most of those RPPs that collected implementation or outcome data did so to inform program development rather than to understand impact. In general, RPPs structured data collection to compare to target benchmarks articulated in their proposals and did not include a comparison group or examine growth over the grant period, with a few exceptions. Although several RPPs reported on the change in survey metrics from the beginning to the end of the grant period, only the High Quality Project-Based Learning RPP had a final evaluation report, and only the Transformative Student Voice RPP reported on student outcome data relative to a comparison group.

A number of factors interfered with the ability of the RPPs to collect data, particularly survey data, to measure spread and impact. The shift to remote learning in spring 2020 made it very hard to obtain survey responses, particularly from students, starting in spring 2020 and through the 2020–21 school year. The pandemic, however, was not the only factor that curtailed the collection of uptake data. For example, a state law prevented one RPP from administering a planned student survey. Faced with superintendent turnover, one RPP elected to abandon their own survey instrument and instead support the district student and staff survey administration to generate support for the RPP's work. This resulted in survey outcomes that were related but not fully aligned with their goals. Another RPP determined that they had not progressed far enough to warrant collecting outcome data. And for the two projects focused on accountability and measurement, research efforts went into validation of process/tools and did not involve measuring uptake at the classroom level. Finally, for the seven RPPs that reported on teacher and/or student survey findings, the population surveyed and representativeness of the respondents were often unspecified, and several RPPs had very low response rates to their surveys.

Based primarily on these data, we consider scaling progress separately for RPPs with different goals: those scaling a version of project-based learning, those attempting to build leadership capacity and shift mindsets, and those developing improved accountability structures and measures. In general, those RPPs that targeted specific classroom instructional practices also had more data related to spread:

⁵ Farrell, C. C., Penuel, W. R., Coburn, C., Daniel, J., & Steup, L. (2021). *Research-practice partnerships in education: The state of the field*. William T. Grant Foundation.

- **The four RPPs that focused on scaling a version of project-based learning were reasonably successful in spreading their instructional practice** (meeting or approaching the 80% threshold set out by the RFP). However, only one RPP collected data on the quality of implementation and the results of these data were disappointing—only one-third of students in one district and one-sixth of students in another district experienced *high-quality* implementation. Three of these RPPs reported some positive student outcomes data, however, these data typically had methodological weaknesses (e.g., based on surveys with low response rates).
- **The four RPPs that aimed to build leadership capacity or shift educator mindsets as a strategy for instructional change have mixed evidence of success**; two have some evidence of increasing teacher or leader capacity. For example, one RPP reported that the percentage of educators rating their schools as strong regarding effective leaders increased from 7% to 23% from 2019 to 2022. Another RPP reported that 80% of teachers reported incorporating the target instructional practice into their lesson plans but not necessarily on a daily basis. A third RPP provided evidence of increased teacher awareness of the program but did not report on change in instructional practice. The final RPP in this group provided no data on spread.
- **For the two RPPs targeting improved accountability or measurement, only one of these provided concrete evidence of spread.** This RPP expanded the number of districts served from 4 to 15 during the grant period.

In an initiative focused on equitable scaling of deeper learning practices, it is also important to understand the extent to which these practices reached the students farthest from opportunity.

[Very few RPPs reported on scaling progress specifically for students farthest from opportunity.](#)

Although RPPs planned to examine spread for particular student groups that they identified as farthest from opportunity, most did not end up reporting on uptake data disaggregated by student group. The pandemic likely contributed to this trend, since low response numbers on student surveys can mean inadequate numbers for disaggregation. Ultimately, only three RPPs reported data on spread by student group.

- One RPP examined scaling progress metrics by student groups and found that students receiving special education services, English Learner support, and those eligible for free or reduced-price meals experienced at least one project in the second year at comparable rates to all students. In one district, however, students in these groups were slightly less likely than students overall to experience a project that met the criteria for high quality.

- One RPP provided implementation data broken down by student group. This RPP analyzed two waves of student exit ticket data to determine whether students of all races and ethnicities reported sharing an idea in class. Based on these data, they found that a lower percentage of Black and Latinx students than White and Asian students reported sharing an idea out loud in class.
- One RPP examined participation in their courses and found that they served a disproportionately high percentage of females and students of color.

All three of these RPPs were from the category targeting deeper learning teaching practices related to project-based learning. This is consistent with the finding that RPPs in this group were most likely to conceive of equity in terms of equitable reach.

In addition to tracking scaling progress, many RPPs reported on their productivity in terms of the creation of resources or contributions to the knowledge based on deeper learning.

All RPPs created tools or resources related to their target deeper learning practices, and several RPPs contributed to the knowledge base related to deeper learning by disseminating research findings through journal articles, book chapters, and/or white papers.

About half of the RPPs designed these resources with the idea that they would be adopted more broadly. For example, the competency toolkits developed by Best for the Future were always intended to be available to districts throughout New Hampshire and beyond. Other RPPs developed resources primarily for use in their partner districts, such as OCERA's collaborative project-based learning training or the learner continuum and performance outcomes that Envision Learning Partners developed for each element of Colorado Spring's graduate profile as part of the Leadership and Change Management RPP. These resources and tools codify elements of the work for future use. In addition, half of the RPPs disseminated research findings from their work through scholarly publications. The focus of the research findings mirrored the work of each RPP: DIG Deeper produced a series of papers and presentations on teachers' perceptions of students' abilities to engage in critical thinking; The Berkeley-Hayward RPP developed a series of articles on organizational dynamics and change; the iHub RPP produced articles and book chapters on co-design with practitioners; the Transforming Student Voice RPP published articles on youth voice; and PBLWorks, the TA provider for the High Quality Project-Based Learning project, commissioned four white papers to develop research-based definitions of four deeper learning competencies (complex communication, collaboration, self-direction, and critical thinking). Although few of these resources and writings are based on empirical evidence of improvements to teacher practice or student outcomes, they nonetheless contribute new knowledge to the field.

Ownership and Sustainability

In addition to spread and depth, we examined the extent to which the RPPs provided evidence that their focal practices would be sustained even after the initiative ended, and that the school systems partner had assumed ownership of the practice. To assess scaling progress related to ownership and sustainability, we draw on both our interviews with RPP members as well as the documents they provided.

One simple indicator of sustainability is the extent to which RPPs have funding to continue scaling the deeper learning practice. Several projects had lined up funding to continue the work they started with the DL+D initiative.

Although few of the RPPs had plans to continue the work with all partners involved, in at least two cases the school systems partner is continuing to invest in the deeper learning practice. The OCERA RPP secured a 3-year sustaining commitment from Oklahoma City Public Schools to scale collaborative project-based learning. The work of the High Quality Project-Based Learning RPP will continue in both partner school systems but without the involvement of the research partner. At the conclusion of the grant, the local school systems in Hawaii had plans to fund PBL101 training for all new teachers, and the local school system in New Hampshire had plans to build internal coaching capacity and expertise related to project-based learning through hiring for three new positions. S-CAP will continue using a fee for service model, albeit with fewer partners and reduced funding. In addition, four RPPs submitted funding proposals to do related work with the same school system partners, and three of these were funded at the time of our interviews. For example, at the time of the interviews, Inflexion (the research and technical assistance partner in the Reflective Practice RPP) was continuing to work with the Anaheim High School District on strengthening their career preparedness model to support development of deeper learning competencies, which the district views as necessary for postsecondary success.

[Beyond continued funding, some RPPs made progress aligning district systems to support deeper learning practices, helping to ensure that the practices will be sustained.](#)

Several RPPs were successful in establishing processes in their partner school systems that will help sustain deeper learning. For example, the OCERA RPP initiated several changes that should support the use of collaborative project-based learning in Oklahoma City Public Schools moving forward. These changes included combining curriculum and instruction and professional development into a single department, establishing common planning time for all 7th-grade social studies teachers in the district, and aligning the teacher evaluation system to the practice. Notably, the work of four RPPs resulted in deeper learning being codified in a district's strategic plan, graduate profile, or graduation requirements.

Finally, the work of two RPPs aligned with efforts at the state level. The work of the S-CAP RPP provided a proof point for new legislation in Colorado that provides small grants to support

alternative accountability work. And in California, the partners in the Reflective Practice RPP view a statewide effort to align academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning as a leverage point for sustaining the school visioning work.

Although we have less evidence related to ownership, some RPPs intentionally cultivated local ownership of the work or learned about how to do so.

Several RPPs, notably iHub, intentionally fostered local ownership by engaging teachers in a co-design process. In addition, the OCERA RPP created a survey for the district to administer, building capacity within the district to collect and use data for continuous improvement. The Berkeley-Hayward RPP developed an approach to professional learning that enables teacher leaders to take on professional learning, establishing a model for creating teacher agency that the district has already replicated with a literacy initiative and plans to carry forward.

Further, many RPP members perceived their work as resulting in greater capacity among school and district leaders to support deeper learning. For example, as part of the work of the Reflective Practice RPP, two assistant superintendents facilitated the envisioning process with schools, gaining the skills and knowledge to continue the work moving forward. These assistant superintendents were responsible for coaching school principals, making them well positioned to influence instruction in the district. As with depth, measurement of ownership is not straightforward, and the RPPs did not attempt to quantify teacher or district ownership of the target practices.

Ultimately, successful scaling involves not a single element but a more holistic approach to changing culture. One RPP member described how the target practice had permeated her district: *“We scaled across 22 schools, over, at this point, 800 teachers and we're continuing to train our teachers. It's not something that people say we do, it's just part of the culture.”*

Initiative Structure and Supports

The DL+D initiative had several features that are not typical of foundation initiatives: the initiative RFP set out an extremely ambitious scaling goal, the RFP required grantees to be structured as RPPs, and Hewlett supported Carnegie to facilitate an initiative-wide learning community. RPP members had feedback on how the initiative was structured and how Hewlett supported the work.

Respondents liked engaging with ideas about scaling and educational transformation but found the 3-year timeline too short given the uptake goal.

The initiative was grounded in the theoretical literature on scaling, and the RFP specified that each grantee would scale the focal practice from 15% to 80% of targeted users in 3 years. Some grantees expressed enthusiasm for the scaling frameworks highlighted in the RFP and welcomed the chance to engage with organizational theory. Others found the initiative vision problematic, noting that the ambitious scaling goal seemed to prioritize spread over depth and did not account for the complexity and uncertainty of working with school districts.

Further, the scaling target of 80% uptake of the deeper learning practice struck many as unrealistic. Interview respondents cited several factors that made the scaling goal unrealistic given the 3-year timeframe.

- *Transformation requires a foundation.* One research partner thought that many RPPs did not have the existing partnership foundation or “existence proof” of deeper learning practice on which to build.
- *Deep shifts take time.* Others noted that making deep shifts to teaching and learning requires time. One respondent thought it would take a minimum of 5 years for teachers to make sense of new practices.
- *Partnership requires investment.* Another criticism was that 3 years was too short for a grant that included both partnership development and implementation. Many of the funded RPPs were new partnerships that needed time to develop systems for working together. Further, the funded RPPs were complex; 6 of the 10 RPPs had three or more partner organizations.
- *Local context matters.* Another criticism was that all the partners needed to have a better understanding of local context before starting the work. New RPPs, in particular, were more likely to encounter unexpected challenges in the school system environment that they had to navigate while also figuring out how to partner, whereas the handful of established partnerships were better positioned to start the work in part because they understood the context of the partner school system.

[T]hey were very specific in their requirements about reaching 80% of the kids...I felt like I was jumping through hoops, because I was being asked to write a proposal to do something I knew was impossible, and so was everyone else.

If you are a brand new RPP and you're just figuring this out through this project, that environment can really throw a wrench in what you're trying to do.

Another consequence of the overly ambitious scaling target was that it ultimately led to a lack of clear goals or accountability. Recognizing that the 80% scaling goal was too high, grantees were left without a clear target for their work. This vacuum in terms of expectations led to “*some difficulties for people to get really clear about what the game is and how to move forward,*” in the words of one respondent.

The focus on partnership added value but the initiative’s lack of focus on continuous improvement seemed like a missed opportunity to some.

In general, RPP members like the initiative’s partnership emphasis, and practitioner partners found the collaborations to be respectful and fruitful. Researchers liked the emphasis on a collaborative rather than an evaluative lens. As one noted, their work “*wasn’t just a study, it was very much a collaborative.*” The external nature of the RPP and inclusion of a research partner also provided a structure to maintain focus on the deeper learning practice within the partner school systems.

I always felt during all these years that we’ve been working together that if it wasn’t the challenge from the external partner, [the district] would always revert back to the established practices, because the incentives to keep the status quo are so high and disincentive of doing something challenging in a district like this are so strong that it needs to have an external partner who prods, who suggests, who presents data, who interprets the data for them.

Some RPPs, however, reported confusion about the role of the research partner. The DL+D RFP required applicants to form an RPP, but the RFP provided little guidance about the researcher role, instead emphasizing scaling metrics. One partner considered this a missed opportunity to emphasize data use for continuous improvement across the initiative. Because there was not a focus on continuous improvement, she noted that RPPs involving multiple school systems lacked opportunities for cross-district learning to accelerate the work. Further, the cross-RPP learning was hampered by the diversity of the 10 funded projects.

Many practitioners valued opportunities that the initiative learning community afforded to learn from each other, but this learning was constrained by the diversity of their goals and contexts.

I think just seeing that other practitioners are doing this and that it’s not so far over on the edge helped...It’s like, “no, this is tangible and smaller districts than us are engaged in this right now.”

After the start of the initiative, Hewlett funded Carnegie to facilitate a learning community that, until the pandemic, included in-person convenings. Many respondents found Carnegie’s facilitation and the use of a consultancy protocol in particular to be helpful. Several district staff members mentioned that hearing from others provided examples of what was possible that they could bring back and share. One noted that, “*When you’re able to*

collaborate with RPPs that are outside of the work looking in, they are able to see solutions that we didn't see." The learning community also demonstrated Hewlett's commitment to learning and improvement.

A few respondents noted that the diversity of deeper learning practices and project goals was a barrier to cross-site learning. Because the projects were so different from each other the discussions felt forced at times. Having narrower guidelines within the initiative around who was funded might have been more conducive to creating a learning community of grantees.

[A]ny funder these days struggles with what would constitute a community of its projects and its portfolio. I think there is a tension between the diversity of that portfolio and its unity. The more unity there is, the more reason there is to meet... if you want a community, then you better have a more coherent portfolio. If your goal is portfolio diversity, don't try to build a community around it. Try to support them, your grantees, in finding the relevant communities, if they don't already have them. Be a broker as opposed to be a convener.

Implications for Funders

The DL+D initiative was a short but ambitious undertaking to learn about how to equitably scale deeper learning. Our retrospective look at the progress made by DL+D grantees unearthed pockets of excellence—many grantees overcame the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and succeeded in training teachers and leaders; developing curricula, tools, and resources; and contributing to the existing knowledge base. We even see reasonable evidence of the spread of instructional practices for the subset of grantees that focused on scaling a concrete practice. However, the initiative yielded very little insight into the quality or depth of implementation of these practices or their impact on student outcomes or equity. In this section, we highlight implications for funders seeking to scale change and optimize learning.

Fund a planning period to ensure understanding of local context.

Several RPPs were new partnerships, and the researchers and technical assistance providers did not always fully understand the district context in which they were trying to scale. For some, this lack of understanding resulted in a slow start to the work; others realized that their original plan was not going to work and ended up making fundamental shifts in strategy. The DL+D initiative included a planning day at Stanford University for prospective grantees, but this time was not sufficient to ensure that each RPP had a deep understanding of the school system partner.

Structuring funding to include an initial planning grant would enable partners to conduct a landscape scan or capacity assessment, including getting input from teachers, district-level staff, and community members. For initiatives working at the district level, partners could also assess the organizational health and readiness for innovation of potential partner districts using the domains underlying Pivot Learning's *District Readiness Index*, which Hewlett helped fund.⁶ This planning period would help ensure that any change efforts are designed with an understanding of local needs and organizational challenges, allow partners to tailor their strategy to the power dynamics in the district, and provide time for partnership development.

Co-design timelines and goals with grantees

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

⁶ Pivot Learning. (2022). *District readiness index*. <https://districtreadiness.org/>.

Co-designed success metrics that are revisited as the work unfolds can help motivate and focus change efforts.

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

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

Consider the factors that make RPPs the right strategy

Through the DL+D initiative, Hewlett funded RPPs to facilitate learning about how to scale educational change quickly. RPPs, however, require a long-term investment to reap the benefits of partnership development and develop an authentic continuous improvement culture. Further, research within an RPP can take many forms, from research and development (i.e., co-development of curricular materials), to formative feedback in support of continuous improvement, to rigorous summative evaluation. Ultimately, the RPP structure is designed to accelerate improvement within school systems, not to provide systematic data across partnerships. Most of the DL+D RPPs focused on co-design, providing limited evidence on scaling progress across the initiative or the extent to which students farthest from opportunity were served. Distilling learnings across grantees is best achieved with an initiative-level evaluation that includes common scaling or success measures. Ideally, this evaluation would begin when an initiative is launched to establish a theory of action, provide formative feedback, develop common metrics with input from grantees, and shape grantee reporting requirements. Hewlett has shifted strategies since funding the DL+D initiative; however, we believe these insights to be broadly applicable to future efforts to catalyze improvements to teaching and learning in schools and districts.