# The Commonwealth Learning Partnership: How Virginia's Education Vanguard Came Together to Equip Teachers, Modernize Public Education, and Spur Educational Change

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### Abstract

The Commonwealth Learning Partnership is a statewide network in Virginia made up of nearly 40 state education organizations and university members, plus national partners and supporters. The mission of the partnership is to actualize the Profile of a Virginia Graduate. Individually and collectively, Partnership members reach most educators across the state, providing them with resources and responsive in-service and pre-service opportunities. The history and evolution of the Partnership demonstrates the critical nature of policy, organizational collaboration, and outside investments to support and upskill the educator workforce.

Keywords: education leadership, professional development, Profile of a Virginia Graduate

For the past three years, a monthly meeting is held for Virginia's education vanguard.

The group typically gathers virtually, although sometimes in-person, representing most of the

Commonwealth's leading education organizations, associations, and teacher education programs.

Together, they discuss the state's evolving education landscape, various signature initiatives,

ways to partner, and opportunities to act on a set of visionary education "Profiles" for Virginia

students, classrooms, educators, and education leaders.

These are the members of the Commonwealth Learning Partnership, a network formalized at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, after months of planning and years of working together ad-hoc. Arguably, their reach extends to more communities, schools, and educators than any other network in Virginia. Members include the Virginia Association of School Superintendents, Virginia ASCD affiliate, EdPolicy Forward at George Mason University, William & Mary School of Education and School University Research Network, and the Virginia School Consortium for Learning.

The mission of the Partnership is to actualize the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate*, a statewide framework describing the knowledge, skills, and experiences Commonwealth students should have before they graduate. Partnership members work individually and collectively to provide teachers, education leaders, and central office staff with the highest quality and most accessible professional learning resources and trainings. The Commonwealth Learning Partnership's genesis, evolution, and impact elevate important insights into the types of collective action and statewide policy and perceptual shifts enable and encourage real educational change.

### Laying the Groundwork: An Educators' Summit on Performance-Based Assessments

In the spring 2016, more than 400 Virginia education leaders gathered on the campus of the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development, to explore ways performance-based assessments—then called localized performance assessment—might support a reduction in standardized tests and increase deeper learning with students. Remarks made during the summit set wheels in motion for a large private investment that would fully fund a much larger statewide agenda—one that went well beyond assessments to ambitiously attempt to modernize public education so that Virginia students and staff would be able to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Two William and Flora Hewlett Foundation program officers attended the summit and heard then state superintendent Steven Staples cast a clear vision of a more equitable Virginia public education system, one where students received a world-class education that promoted deeper learning and prepared students for the world and future of work. According to Staples, at the center of the public education experience was the development and mastery of five futureready skill sets, dubbed the "5Cs": critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creative thinking, and citizenship.

Following opening remarks, the two Hewlett program officers met with Virginia teachers to learn about their local performance assessment work and joined a conversation with top policy and system leaders to discuss the types of legislation, flexibilities, and regulations necessary to support performance assessment and broader innovation efforts at scale.

### **Private Investment Paves the Way**

Several months after the summit, the Hewlett Foundation made a \$1.1 million investment to support to Virginia's local alternative assessment work, and to actualize Superintendent Staples' vision for a more modern and equitable public education system. The investment was granted to a national nonprofit, Jobs For the Future (JFF), with the responsibility of providing staffing and support to Virginia's education leaders, with flexibility to redirect funds to education organizations in the state. It was a two-year investment that began in July 2017 and ended in June 2019.

Before the grant went into effect, JFF staff flew to Richmond, Virginia to meet with Virginia Department of Education leadership and a set of pre-service (e.g., schools of education), and in-service (e.g., state education associations) providers. At the meeting, attendees went through Virginia's education priorities and wins from prior years. Table 1 describes those positive policy shifts in chronological order (Steinberg et al., 2020):

# Table 1

Timeline of Virginia's Major Education Policy Wins, 2013-2016

Year	Major Education Policy Decision(s)	
2013	Governor Terry McAuliffe was elected with a campaign promise to address "over- testing."	
2014	Virginia passed HB930 and SB306 which required replacement of five Standards of Learning (SOL) tests with "age-appropriate, authentic assessments and portfolios," and established a <i>Standards of Learning Innovation Committee</i> . Appointed committee members included several school superintendents and administrators. The committee was given unprecedented authority to influence state policy in support of public education and school-related innovation.	
2015	The "SOL Committee" recommended the Virginia State Board of Education develop <i>Profile of a Virginia Graduate</i> —a common framework to articulate what a student should know, be able to do, and experience by graduation. The SOL Committee worked with the Governor and Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to award five \$50,000 high school innovation planning grants to Fairfax County, Newport News, Salem, Williamsburg-James City County, and a Chesterfield-Richmond area consortium. Recipients were granted policy flexibility and regulation exemptions to support innovation efforts.	
2016	More than 400 educators gathered on the campus of the University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development for the first-ever <i>Innovations in Student Assessments</i> summit. After the summit, the Hewlett Foundation made a \$1.1 million contribution to Jobs For the Future to support Virginia education efforts.	

Beyond the positive political and policy moves described in Table 1, the group discussed the value of being a trusted network of colleagues who collectively held outsized influence on education leaders in the state. Many of the education leaders in that meeting had worked together for years. A number were involved in related efforts, either their own or ones supported at the national level. For example, a cadre of Virginia school districts represented by their superintendents were a part of national networks focused on performance-based assessment, deeper learning, and developing local profiles of a graduate. The group was interested in spreading and scaling these ideas and there was openness and willingness to come together as a more formalized network.

Without realizing it, the group was putting in motion the characteristics of healthy networks for social impact, which as described in *Connecting to Change the World: Harnessing the Power of Networks for Social Impact* include the following eight design issues: purpose; membership; value proposition; coordination, facilitation, and communication, resources, governance, assessment, and operating principles (Plastrik et al., 2014).

Collectively, the group requested to focus Hewlett funding and its overall purpose on actualizing the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate*, by developing a companion set of profiles for the Virginia classroom, educator, and education leader. They also wanted to support extant efforts to promote performance-based assessments. The value proposition was the group's belief that an updated "Profile" of what students should learn and be able to do warranted similar "Profiles" on what teachers and leaders should know and be able to do, along with a more equitable and modern picture of a Virginia school and classroom.

The group discussed and agreed that profile development work was a critical for pursuing educational equity across the state, and addressing demographic disparities, including alarming differences in academic outcomes among students of color, English language learners, and others. They also wanted to ensure a broader group of leaders engaged in developing the profile, and that collectively this design team was demographically and geographically representative of the state. A matrix was developed that included various design team dimensions, including position, expertise, location, race, and gender.

Based on the group's thinking, the supportive policy landscape, historic education wins, and the enthusiasm of a committed vanguard, JFF set-up a pooled fund to enable Hewlett funds to passthrough JFF and be sub-granted to Virginia education groups. Anything funded had to focus on one or more of these three priorities: (1) translate local models of instruction and assessment for educators across Virginia, (2) lay the groundwork for a positive policy environment long-term, and (3) build for long-term educator and education system capacity related to the actualization of the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate* (Krauss, 2018). The funding also provided direct support for the Virginia Department of Education's development and launch of EdEquity Virginia, an initiative that provided training, resources, and convenings to educators on strategies to identify and address racial disparities in schools and prioritize and pursue equity. Table 2 outlines the entities that received initial pooled funding and what they proposed.

## Table 2

Sub-Awardee	Description of Activities Funded by Grant Dollars
EdPolicy <i>Forward</i> : The Center for Education Policy at George Mason University	Co-host a series of convenings with William & Mary for education in-service and pre-service providers to inform the development of a <i>Profile of a Virginia Educator;</i> lead the initial development of a <i>Profile of a Virginia Educator.</i>
Virginia Association for Supervision and Curriculum learning (VASCD)	Convene a group of education thought leaders and engage VASCD members to develop a <i>Profile of a Virginia Classroom</i> and accompanying briefs.
The Virginia School Consortium for Learning (VASCL)	Start-up support for an education innovation network of school district teams, called the Virginia Learning Innovation Network (VALIN).
Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS)	Develop a new Superintendents Academy focused on training and coaching new superintendents.

Inaugural Round of Hewlett Sub-Awardees, 2017-2018

Virginia Department of Education	Unrestricted support to drive and participate in priority- furthering activities.
WHRO	Curate video clips and media to showcase school districts implementing local <i>Profiles of a Graduate</i> and performance-based assessments.
William & Mary School of Education	Co-host a series of convenings with George Mason University for education in-service and pre-service providers to inform the development of a <i>Profile of a Virginia</i> <i>Education Leader;</i> lead the initial development of a <i>Profile</i> <i>of a Virginia Education Leader.</i>
William & Mary School University Resource Network (SURN)	Facilitate/staff in-service and pre-service provider meetings and administer a statewide survey to those providers on the alignment of their activities to the <i>Profile of a Virginia</i> <i>Graduate</i> .

The Hewlett pooled fund ran for two additional cycles after the first set of sub-awards. Because grants were connected, sub-awardees met regularly and started forming a plan to move forward in a more unified way. Of central importance to the group was engaged with teachers and leaders who were active in the profession. As such, each funded effort included some level of participation and input from superintendents, school leaders, and teachers.

A pooled fund designed around a shared purpose—actualizing the profile of a Virginia graduate—accelerated and formalized a key aspect of systems and social change, alignment. As facilitator, JFF provided a simple application and reporting process, which required recipients to articulate how dollars and activities would facilitate educational change. Through writing and discussions, the group enacted a change-process like the four steps described in *Systems Thinking for Social Change*: (1) build a foundation and affirm readiness for change; (2) clarify current reality, (3) make a choice in favor of the change you want to see, (4) focus on high-leverage interventions (Stroh, 2015).

## Launch of Virginia is for Learners

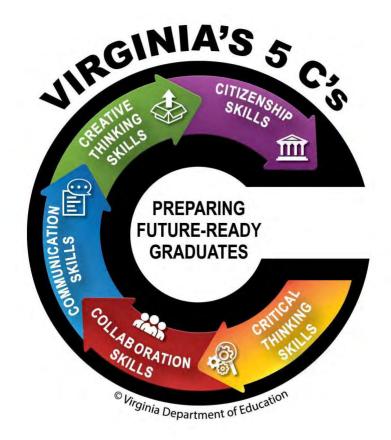
While pooled fund awardees worked to launch their efforts and integrate group priorities into existing work (e.g., tools and resources), VDOE—led by interim state superintendent, Steve Constantino—met with key policy leaders and communication specialists to build a broader communications campaign that could articulate and activate a statewide education agenda. In addition to focusing on modernizing public education, this agenda was designed to prioritize equitable and inclusive learning experiences, and implementation of the *Profile of a Graduate*.

With approval from the Virginia Tourism Corporation, VDOE worked with JFF staff and a Richmond-based communications firm Capital Results, to develop the "Virginia is for Learners" education campaign. The Department also continued its efforts with local districts on performance assessments and formally launched EdEquityVA, which—in addition to generalized resources, trainings, and conferences—provided technical assistance to school districts and teachers who wanted to work explicitly on anti-racist teaching and learning practices, and who were committed to building more equitable learning systems and student experiences.

That same year (2018), Ralph Northam became governor with a campaign promise to prioritize improving public education, and the Virginia State Board of Education officially approved updated state graduation requirements aligned with the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate* shown in Figure 1.

# Figure 1

Profile of a Virginia Graduate 5 C's



The following year, then Governor Ralph Northam and then State Superintendent James Lane held a press conference at the Capitol to officially announce "Virginia is for Learners" as a gubernatorial and statewide public information campaign to modernize public education in the Commonwealth and pursue education equity. The campaign goals were to (1) focus on deeper learning through the prioritization of the "5Cs" for the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate*, (2) reform Virginia Standards of Learning, through the reduction of standardized tests and introduction of high-quality performance-based assessments, and (3) adjust Standards of Accreditation for school performance to align with the *Profile of a Virginia Graduate* (Virginia Governor's Press Secretary, 2019). After the press conference, the education groups supported by Hewlett pooled fund, plus others, met with state leadership to discuss next steps. As a result of that meeting and several subsequent conversations, the *Virginia is for Learners* coalition was formed.

# From Campaign to Coalition: Virginia Education Leaders Formalize Their Network to Deliver on *Virginia is for Learners* Priorities and Promises

Throughout 2019, the *Virginia is for Learners* coalition met and discussed how to work with VDOE to deliver on issue campaign promises. Discussions included progress being made by Hewlett sub-awardees who were finalizing profiles of a Virginia classroom, educator, and education leader, and the early successes of VaSCL's innovation network (VALIN), VASS's superintendent's academy, and William & Mary SURN's academies for Virginia principals and assistant superintendents.

Coalition members increasingly heard about more school districts adopting and operationalizing local profiles of a graduate and using "Virginia is for Learners" to communicate their efforts (one school district emblazoned "Virginia is for Learners" on their football field). Initiatives to modernize public education, actualize the profiles, and prioritize equitable learning seemed stronger and more visible than ever. As a result, the coalition decided it was time to become a more permanent, connected, and sustainable statewide partnership. This followed a process that leading networks expert June Holley calls "know, knit, and nudge the network" (Holley, 2012).

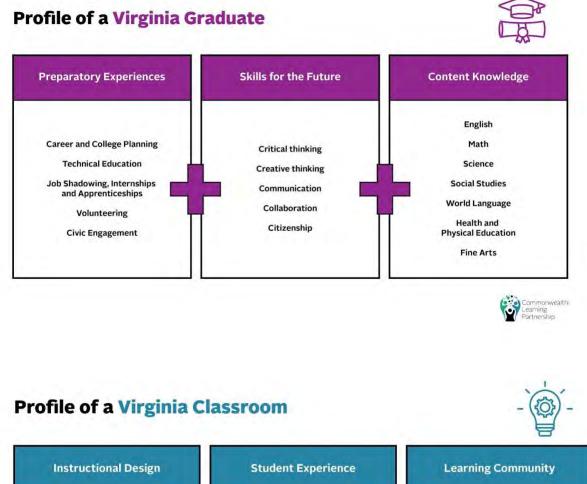
From Coalition to Partnership: Formation of the Commonwealth Learning Partnership

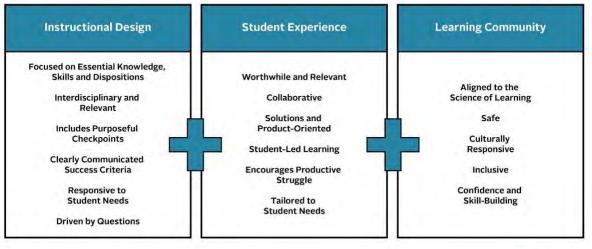
The coalition spent 2019 and early 2020 aligning professional expectations and resources of educators with the Profile of a Virginia Graduate and the revised accreditation standards. Coalition members, led by the Hewlett sub-awardees were a driving force in developing and offering professional learning resources and trainings, including those being offered by EdEquityVA. They agreed that becoming a formalized network would maximize impact and access to professional learning resources for educators, leaders, and the public. From this idea came the concept of the Commonwealth Learning Partnership.

The Hewlett sub-awardees became the founding members of the Commonwealth Learning Partners, just as they had been the leaders who gathered after the summit on performance assessments and the ones to create companion profiles—as shown in Figure 3—and form the *Virginia is for Learners* coalition. In consultation with JFF staff, the group decided to dedicate remaining Hewlett funds to support an executive director for the partnership, or what networks expert June Holley would call a "network weaver" (Holley, 2012). The person they chose for the role was Gena Keller, a recently retired VDOE Assistant Superintendent for Learning, former school superintendent, and counselor.

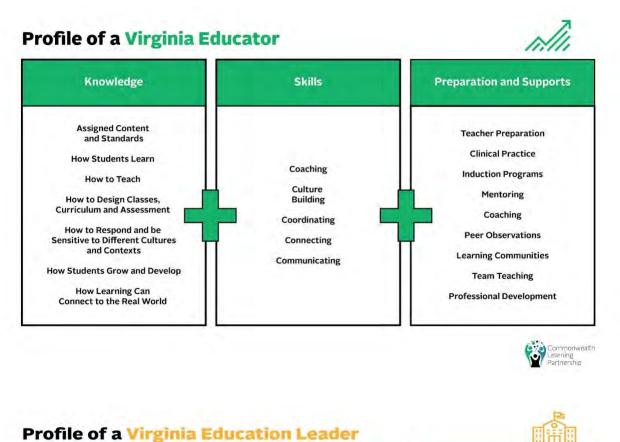
## Figure 3

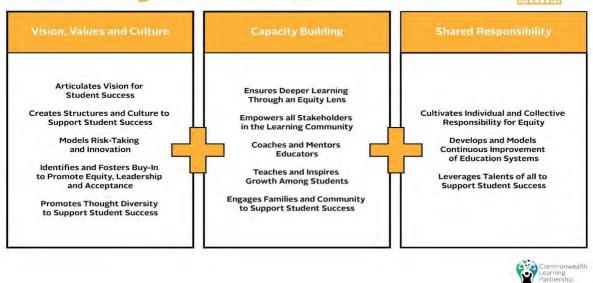
Graphics of the Profiles of a Virginia Graduate, Classroom, Educator, and Education Leader











# Launching a Partnership in a Pandemic

Days before the planned in-person public unveiling of the Commonwealth Learning Partnership, Covid-19 shutdown the world and Virginia's schools. Instead of meeting at the capitol, the founding partners met by Zoom to decide how to move forward. There was total consensus that as the state education vanguard with a responsibility to support Virginia teachers and leaders in all 132 school districts, the priority needed to be immediate support to the field and frontlines.

The Partnership pivoted with help from communications firm, Capital Results, and JFF staff. Instead of making an in-person public announcement as a new statewide Partnership, they did a soft launch as an online resource for districts and schools, and then launched two online campaigns to elevate support to education professionals on the ground:

- "Educator Heroes" celebrated school staff (e.g., teachers, counselors, librarians) nominated by their communities who were going above and beyond to support students during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- "Voices from the Field" published reflection pieces and quotes from teachers and leaders on what they were learning, seeing, and hoping for as the pandemic progressed. These reflections included educator experiences with the pandemic, as well as racial violence, and economic crises.

The first year of Partnership meetings became a war room for Virginia's education vanguard. The profiles took a backseat, although partners did learn a lot about how the Profiles worked and needed adjustments to accommodate crisis and virtual learning. The real power of the partnership became the networked capabilities, collective wisdom, and reach of the group (Plastrik et al., 2014).

As a "network of networks" the group could share and disseminate information quickly and at scale. They developed and deployed no-cost rapid response programming, listening sessions, and learning events to teachers and leaders across the state. Several partners continued their signature initiatives, adapting to a virtual Covid-19 context. Partners worked together to create new resources and provide real-time coaching to administrators. The group worked closely with VDOE leadership to ensure alignment of priorities and to optimize state support for educators on the frontlines. For some districts and schools, this continued to include profile and assessment-related work. For most, it focused on triage and removing learning barriers while responding to urgent staff and student needs.

### **Return to School: Moving Profiles Statewide and Schoolwide**

In 2021 and 2022, the Partnership was able to shift from rapid response to focusing on the future and supporting an inclusive education recovery from Covid-19. Schools returned to inperson learning and the Partnership considered its next phase of work. By 2021, the Partnership had expanded beyond its founding partners to include nearly 30 Virginia-based education groups and universities, plus a growing group of national partners and supporters. The founding group transformed into the partnership's governing body leading efforts with executive director, Gena Keller.

In the fall 2021, Virginia Learns—the state's first-ever K-12 education intermediary was founded with the expressed purpose of bringing together business and education leaders with the shared goal of creating a more innovative, relevant, and equitable public education system in Virginia, to ensure all public-school students in Virginia receive an education that prepares them for the world and workforce (Virginia Learns, 2021). As an independent nonprofit, it formally partnered with the Partnership, giving the network an organizational and fiscal home. Founding partners found new footing with their signature initiatives, many in their third or fourth years of implementation. At the same time, the political landscape in Virginia changed dramatically. Following Democratic governors, Republican candidate Glenn Youngkin was elected to be Virginia's new governor, resulting in new education leadership at the cabinet and agency levels. Several education priorities related to the profile work, especially social emotional learning and racial equity work were called into question, and in some districts banned altogether. The *Virginia is for Learners* brand and EdEquityVA website were suspended.

Because the Commonwealth Learning Partnership was designed as a non-partisan and distributed network model, it was able to continue even in a politically contentious environment. Virginia governors can only serve one four-year term; the Partnership operates with the belief it is crucial to seek common priorities and ways to work with the department of education across years and various administrations. This was critical for local educators because the political transition was confusing and concerning for many. Even though district and school teams were unsure of what was happening at the department, they could seek uninterrupted support and guidance from partnership members. Like the launch year in 2020, the Partnership took advantage of regular meetings to discuss state education changes and decide how to provide rapid response and support back to the field.

Table 3 describes what each of the Partnership's signature initiatives looked like during that period, and how it continues to look today. The pandemic and political climate led to innovations and collaboration that may not have happened otherwise. In some cases, it forced conversations about equity and inclusion and evolved efforts to focus on student development of the 5Cs and deeper learning skills to the need to prepare them for a rapidly changing world highlighting the importance of more durable skills.

# Table 3

Commonwealth Learning Partnership Activities, 2021-2023

Founding Member	Signature Initiative(s)
EdPolicy <i>Forward</i> : The Center for Education Policy at George Mason University	Partnership members from George Mason University (GMU) worked with colleagues from William & Mary to put the Profiles of a Virginia Educator and Education Leader into practice. Through this work, GMU representatives promoted social justice through the development of educators and leaders as action-oriented ambassadors who speak to and address issues of educational equity and inclusion. GMU members surveyed the field to check for awareness and interest of, and investment into the Profiles and conducted aligned action research. They also interrogated the Profiles and survey feedback exploring key differences and unique themes between the responses of educators of color and white educators.
Virginia ASCD	VASCD completed the Profile of a Virginia Classroom and companion implementation briefs. They aligned regular programming, including the VASCD annual conference, one-day conferences, workshops, webinars, and module- based courses with the profile work. Beyond profile work, VASCD maintained and strengthened partnerships with other founding members of the Partnership. For example, VASCD and VaSCL partnered to launch a data science micro-credential; and VASCD and William & Mary, SURN co-hosted a Science of Teaching Reading conference.
The Virginia School Consortium for Learning (VASCL)	VaSCL held VALIN cohort 2.0 virtually during the 2020- 2021 school year, cohort 3.0 virtually and in-person in the 2021-2022 school year, and cohort 4.0, moving under the umbrella of the Partnership virtually and in-person during the 2022-2023 school year. The Partnership is currently designing cohort 5.0 to kick-off summer 2023. Cohort 5.0 will reinvigorate a focus on the Profiles through communities of practice that focus on building local portraits of a graduate as the north star of districts' innovation work. By design, VALIN works with an expansive network of school district teams by using education innovation and

	transformation work, using a coaching and group learning model. It does so with facilitated support of the Advanced Learning Partnership and the involvement of nearly all Commonwealth Learning Partnership members.
Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS)	VASS continued offering, growing, and refining its Superintendents Academy, now called the Virginia Transformational Leadership Academy, which includes learning sessions on the Profiles of a Virginia Graduate, Classroom, Educator, and Education Leader, as well as executive coaching. VASS also partners with the Commonwealth Learning Partnership on issues of superintendent retention and support to VaLIN on executive leadership.
William & Mary School of Education	Continues to play a lead role in the Partnership by focusing on transformational leadership and working to identify and implement effective supports for Virginia emerging and established education leaders, and key levers for real educational change. This work includes continued collaboration with education scholars at George Mason University.
School University Resource Network (SURN)	SURN now runs three signature academies: the SURN Family Engagement Academy, SURN Principal Academy, and the SURN Novice Teacher Academy – all of which have elevated the Profile work and 5Cs for teachers and leaders. The Principal Academy was supported by all three rounds of Hewlett funds and is entering its 12 <sup>th</sup> year. The Family Engagement Academy is supported by renowned family engagement specialist and former State Superintendent, Steve Constantino (his role in starting <i>Virginia is for</i> <i>Learners</i> and the Partnership is abovementioned). The SURN Novice Teacher Academy is a new effort with small school districts aimed to improve teacher retention.

# Looking Ahead: Possible Futures for Partnership and Profile Work

In March 2023, the Commonwealth Learning Partnership will celebrate three years as a

formalized partnership and nearly two years as a part of Virginia Learns. In that time, it has

grown from a founding group of six statewide education organizations and university programs to more than 40 members and many more affiliates. Next year, it will co-launch a network of similar education networks from across the US.

In the past three years, it has grown and supported Virginia teachers and leaders through a global pandemic, racial reckoning, economic crisis, and massive political change. At a state level, its members have worked as a collaborative and historically as individual entities to create a policy landscape that is hospitable to and permissive of the education innovations required to modernize Virginia's public education system and ensure learning opportunities are more equitable and inclusive.

Partnership members are now evaluating new models of networked impact. Currently, the Partnership is working to further embed the VALIN learning improvement and action network structure into the collaborative work of the Partnership. This would enable Partnership members to run thematic and skills-based offerings more seamlessly and strategically to members and the field writ large.

The Partnership has inspired adjacent statewide efforts, such as the Commonwealth Alliance for Thriving Youth, of which it is a member. The "Alliance" is a network of education, youth development, and human service leaders focused on youth well-being and thriving. This network has used the Partnership model as a blueprint to get started. Finally, the Partnership has become an example often cited in national education circles on how to build and operate an education leadership table that can continue through times of crisis and change.

## **Lessons Learned**

The story of the Commonwealth Learning Partnership, which started with remarks given by a state superintendent at a summit on assessment and evolved to include a statewide campaign, coalition, formal leadership network, and nonprofit intermediary illuminates the transformational power of close colleagues working together in networked activities towards a common goal (Plastrik et al., 2014). To spur real educational change and reach teachers and leaders at scale, there must be policy and infrastructural supports available from schoolhouse to statehouse and border to border. To sustain change, those supports must exist outside of a public agency, although ideally with the support of it. To achieve educational equity, there must be political will and distributed, invested leadership across the state who will figure out ways to continue pursuing centering the needs of students, even when efforts are stalled, slowed, or stopped completely.

Among Commonwealth Learning Partnership members are individuals with longstanding and trusting relationships. This has been hugely beneficial, and to continue to be successful, attention must be paid to sustainable leadership and succession planning. The next generation Virginia education vanguard will be well-served if they also have strong bonds and united purpose.

Additionally, the story and evolutionary process of this work shows the importance of public leaders and private funders making generational investments (years-long contributions) into the professional learning and training of the educator workforce, including general operating support to entities like the Commonwealth Learning Partnership and its founding members, who know how to assemble highly effective programming that is responsive to field needs and attends to a bigger vision of educational success and equitable learning.

Today the Partnership is a healthy and vibrant example of what collective action in education can look like at the state level and among in-service and pre-service providers. The work of putting Profiles into practice was slowed and stalled by the Covid-19 pandemic, but the Partnership persisted and provided vital support and rapid response to the field during that time. Members also learned how to best support the field in challenging and changing contexts. This will enable future work where Profiles can be modified and operationalized with more intention and dynamism than could have been possible before.

In another eight years, there may be a new generation of teachers trained by pre-service programs like William & Mary and George Mason University that have actualized the Profiles of a Virginia Educator and Education Leader. They will be supported by education membership organizations and associations like VaSCL and VASCD and that are training and coaching on the Profiles of a Virginia Classroom and Graduate, and they will benefit from in-service academies and institutes like the ones offered by SURN and VASS where they can learn about the Profiles and work towards a shared vision of preparing students (and themselves) to be ready for a changing world and workforce.

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