

Shifting a system

The Reimagine Learning network and
how to tackle persistent problems

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For over a decade, Monitor Institute by Deloitte's Aligned Action practice has focused on aligning groups of individuals and organizations around a strategy—an integrated set of choices around a vision and shared narrative, the actions needed to make progress toward that vision, and a perspective on the resources, competencies, relationships, and systems required for achieving dynamic change over time. Contact the authors for more information or read more about our Aligned Action services on [Deloitte.com](https://deloitte.com).

Introduction

Setting the stage for change

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

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

What this all adds up to is a set of tools, processes, and mindset shifts that let us align a set of diverse actors around a shared understanding of a problem and then create a coordinated plan of attack: a practice called *aligned action*.¹

This approach to social problem-solving is a powerful way to catalyze progress toward—or a shift in—persistent problems. What follows is one story of how that happened: How a group of leaders and their organizations coalesced behind a shared vision for change, how a set of funders experimented with pooled grantmaking to move from isolated to coordinated impact, and how this network worked together to align their action in service of a new approach to education rooted in a deep understanding of how students learn.

Over six years, this group aggregated and deployed US\$38 million in philanthropic capital to create teaching and learning environments that help unleash creativity and potential in all students, including those who have been historically underserved. The group helped build and scale organizational models that embed a focus on both social emotional learning and learner diversity, ultimately funding 25 organizations who collectively serve 7 million students nationwide. A network that launched with a core group of 32 founding members grew to more than 700 members representing a cross-section of the education ecosystem, who through knowledge-sharing and over 300 formal collaborations helped ideas about how to reimagine learning proliferate down to the district level.

The network also helped integrate these ideas into the fabric of our education system through collective advocacy that resulted in helping to shape federal policies such as the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act and to advance priorities at the state level to set the systems and conditions to re-envision learning in the nation’s 14,000 school districts.² From place-based work in a set of districts to engaging with key members of Congress and at the US Department of Education, this effort showed that large-scale, systemic change can happen when bold leaders join together.³

SEEKING SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

If you took a snapshot of the US education system in 2012, you would have captured a persistent problem in action: One million K–12 students were dropping out of school every year. Less than 40 percent of those in K–12 were proficient in math or reading. Only 28 percent of people age 25 and over held a bachelor’s degree or higher, with

great disparities along racial and socioeconomic lines.⁴ Meanwhile, 12 million school-aged people had experienced three or more adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction, and 21 percent of all school-aged people lived in poverty.⁵

This is but a short set of grim statistics signaling a deeper systemic failure. “We were coming out of a didactic and prescriptive approach to education where the only thing that seemed to matter was standardized test scores,” says Ellen Moir, founder and former CEO of New Teacher Center.⁶ There was a pervasive view that the only valid way to improve education was to measure students on math and reading and hold teachers accountable. At the same time, nonprofits were showing up at the schoolhouse in droves. In the decade leading up to 2012, the number of nonprofits in the United States increased to 1.5 million, with nearly 20 percent of them focused on education, creating a fragmented and competitive field.⁷ Concurrently, there was an emerging sense in the funding community that supporting isolated and uncoordinated action would never create the large-scale change that they wanted to see.

If necessity is the mother of invention, perhaps dissatisfaction is the father of action. And a set of change agents was dissatisfied with the status quo. As City Year president Jim Balfanz framed the challenge at that time: “The systemic failure was so crushing and extreme on the kids we served. We knew we had to think differently.”

If you listened carefully to the voices clamoring for a change—any kind of change—you would hear a few reverberating loudly, but in their own silos. Educators, researchers, and advocates for students with learning and attention issues had developed expertise in serving diverse learners, but they were often excluded from the general education-reform conversation and relegated to special education. Proponents of social and emotional learning (SEL), though an active and organized com-

munity since the 1960s and 1970s, were just starting to gain traction in the mainstream conversation as the pendulum swung back from the accountability movement.⁸ Meanwhile, cutting-edge doctors and scientists were learning more about the science of learning, including how trauma—especially the trauma associated with poverty—affects the brain’s development; however, this learning had yet to make its way widely into practice. And funders of each of these “groupings” yearned for broader and deeper impact. While each of these education trailblazers held an important piece of the overall puzzle, they remained fragmented, even among themselves.

The Reimagine Learning network was launched to explore the space between these seemingly disparate groups focused on learning differences, social emotional learning, and trauma.⁹ Catalyzed by Boston-based venture philanthropy organization New Profit and supported with US\$38 million from funders including the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation, the Oak Foundation, the Poses Family Foundation, and eventually the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York, Reimagine Learning aimed to align the action of this diverse network of change agents to support an approach to education based on a deep understanding of how students learn.

The Reimagine Learning network was launched to explore the space between these seemingly disparate groups focused on learning differences, social emotional learning, and trauma.

Even in its earliest days, Reimagine Learning knew it needed a collaborative approach to tackle such a complex problem, as underscored by New Profit founder and CEO Vanessa Kirsch: “I knew it would take the alignment of others to get to deeper system shifts. Together we needed to tackle the

question, ‘How do we get people to see the whole child?’ The moment in time allowed us to pull up and ask, as many others were asking at the time, ‘What are we missing? Why aren’t we getting these kids to the highest levels of performance?’” Reimagine Learning was but one initiative born of this moment in time. It amplified existing efforts and voices and added its own perspective, alongside others, to the movement toward personalized learning and whole child development that we see today.

Originally dubbed the LDSEL network—for Learning Differences/Social Emotional Learning—Reimagine Learning was founded on a belief in the power of intersections: of bringing together previously siloed camps, juxtaposing new ideas, and galvanizing a diverse, innovative network of actors—social entrepreneurs, funders, policymakers, researchers, and even a few celebrities—for a better chance at change for learners. Reimagine Learning’s goal was audacious and desperately needed to fundamentally reimagine how learning happens for children in this country and to offer a new vision of how to meet the needs of a set of learners typically underserved by the education system. It was a call to action that galvanized people and organizations across the country to participate in a collaborative process to craft a vision and in a strategy to shift a system.

In the process, participants shaped more than Reimagine Learning’s vision and strategy—their involvement prompted them to reshape their own organizations, which collectively serve 7 million students nationwide.¹⁰ At its core, Reimagine Learning succeeded in changing the mindsets of many of its participants, who in turn influenced practices in school districts across the country and created a deeper understanding of what supports a “whole child’s” learning in a classroom.

Changing the mindset or paradigm out of which a system arises is one of the most powerful leverage points you can affect.¹¹ Donella Meadows, a systems change guru and environmental scientist,

makes the case as to why mindsets or paradigms are such a powerful leverage point: “Paradigms are the sources of systems.” And while paradigms are sticky, stubborn, and resistant to change at the level of society, in a single individual, a paradigm change can happen, as Meadows characterizes it, “in a millisecond. All it takes is a click in the mind, a falling of scales from eyes, a new way of seeing.”¹² Sounds simple. It’s not. Yet a “new way of seeing” is what the early designers of the Reimagine Learning network sought to foster in their six-year initiative.

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

But gaining a hard-won mindset shift is only the first step in a journey. In the case of Reimagine Learning, getting to that “millisecond” took years, and that was only the beginning of the process to get to action on the ground that would drive outcomes for young people and families. What followed was a series of changes—within and among individuals and organizations, in classrooms and boardrooms, at the dinner table and on the floor of the US Senate—that reflected this reimagining, allowing the effort to come one step closer to unleashing the potential of all students.

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

This case study was developed by Monitor Institute by Deloitte in collaboration with New Profit, with funding provided by the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation. We are not disinterested third-party evaluators, nor are we trying to be. Here is some detail about each of our roles in the launch and facilitation of the Reimagine Learning network:

- **New Profit** served as convener, funder, capacity builder, and backbone over the full life of the network. The organization “held the whole” of this work from its earliest days as a “slow hunch” through its later years as a thriving initiative.
- **Monitor Institute by Deloitte’s** Aligned Action practice worked closely with New Profit as network strategists and facilitators for Reimagine Learning from early 2013 through early 2015. We designed network processes, facilitated conversations and convenings, conducted wide-ranging analyses, and managed working groups. More generally speaking, we focused on the process to generate collective will among a diverse group of participants to more thoughtfully align intent and coordinate action.

As such, we (Monitor Institute by Deloitte) return to this work after four years away from it, seizing the opportunity to reflect with others who lived it and to tell the story not just of *what* happened but *why* and *how* (see the “Methodology” section for details). It’s a behind-the-scenes view, meant to extract lessons for other social impact leaders seeking to leverage networks to change a system.

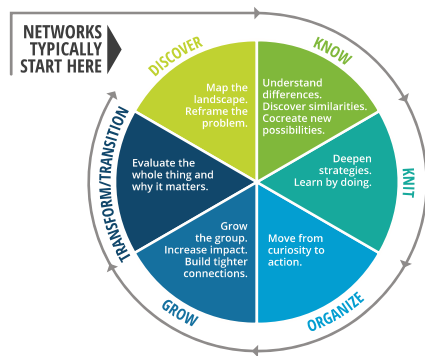
You might be thinking: networks, systems change, collective impact, collaboration, complex problem-solving—enough already. Take one look at the sector literature to see the deluge of opining in recent years since this approach to social change “came onto the scene and quickly became a buzzword and philanthropy darling.”¹³ But for all the abundance of network how-to guides, theory, and criticism, (including our [own contributions](#) to the conversation over the past decade¹⁴), intimate studies of networks, their effort and evolution, seem lacking. Thanks in part to a 2010 case study written by our former colleague, Heather McLeod Grant, of the RE-AMP network,¹⁵ we understand the immense value of learning from deep dives into what it takes to make these “network things” work.¹⁶

We have structured this case study around the stages of the Network Lifecycle, a framework we use as network practitioners to help us understand the journey that a group tends to take to achieve greater alignment and effect transformational change (figure 1). As our former colleague and network pioneer Diana Searce wrote when introducing the Network Lifecycle in 2011, “While there is no universal pattern, most networks focused on achieving a goal, versus remaining a loose social group, tend to evolve according to this pattern.”¹⁷ The real-life activities of any network, including Reimagine Learning, are inevitably more fluid and messy than this neat diagram suggests, but we find it useful for the way it captures the evolutionary nature of the network-building process.

Continued >

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY (CONTINUED)

FIGURE 1
The Network Lifecycle shows how a network can address and solve a problem



Source: Monitor Institute by Deloitte.

For each of the six stages of the Network Lifecycle, we share a brief overview of that phase and a set of prototypical questions a group often explores when there. We then tell the story of Reimagine Learning when in each phase, mining our sources, conversations, and memories for the “moments that mattered.”

For those curious about the nuts and bolts of the moves we made as network facilitators in each phase, we have consolidated that information into a “Playbook” of tactical suggestions, which can be found on page 45. And for those intent on better understanding network impact, we have traced the “threads of influence” the network achieved—some success stories and their often-invisible ripple effects—in figure 5 on page 34.

REIMAGINE LEARNING BY THE NUMBERS

- Started as **32** people from **28** organizations;
- Today includes more than **700** people from **200** organizations;
- Up to **7 million** students served by the organizations in the Reimagine Learning network;
- **US\$38 million** contributed (see cofunders);
- **25** direct investments made in network organizations (see grantee-partners);
- **60** organizations received support from New Profit, Monitor Institute by Deloitte, and Vantage Partners; and
- **300-plus** formal collaborations sparked between network organizations.

FIGURE 2

About Reimagine Learning

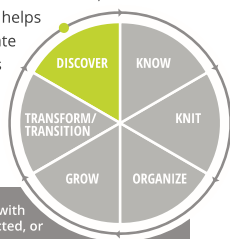
Grantee-partners	Cofunders
<div><ul style="list-style-type: none">• Achievement Network• Big Picture Learning• Branching Minds• CAST• City Connects• City Year• Convergence Center for Policy Resolution/Education Reimagined• Eye to Eye• University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning• Lawrence Public Schools• Lifted• Massachusetts Advocates for Children/Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative• MIT Media Lab• National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools• National Center for Learning Disabilities/Understood• New Classrooms• New Teacher Center• Peace First• PowerMyLearning• Teach For America• Transcend• Turnaround for Children• UDL-IRN• Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence• YouthBuild USA</div>	<div><ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation• New Profit• Oak Foundation• Poses Family Foundation• Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation• Carnegie Corporation of New York• Anonymous funders</div>

Source: Monitor Deloitte.

Discover

Map the landscape. Reframe the problem.

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



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

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

—Shruti Sehra, managing partner, New Profit

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

There is a reason the Network Lifecycle is represented as a circle. For one, network building defies linear, predictable, and tidy processes. In work that's largely about relationships—between people, ideas, organizations—it is sometimes hard to make out a clear “beginning,” to trace what leads to what, to find where one phase ends and another begins. As such, the *discover* phase itself can feel circular, fueled more by questions and a sense of wondering than by clear direction or firm convictions: *How can a group work together to understand the systemic nature of the problem at hand? How do you merge competing or conflicting perspectives? How do you know who should be involved?* Chances are you'll find yourself asking and answering these questions more than once as you feel your way through the ambiguity that precedes action, and toward the opportunity for collective action. As Shruti Sehra, managing partner of New Profit and lead of the Reimagine Learning Fund, says of the early days: “We had lots and lots of debates on where to focus.” Kirsch characterizes the era as one of “happily battling” between perspectives, before a starting place was defined.

But all stories begin somewhere. Often, they start pretty close to home. Reimagine Learning's story begins in 2012, when Kirsch struck up a conversation with the trustees of the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation at New Profit's annual Gathering of Leaders. Kirsch, herself dyslexic, had recently enrolled her daughter, also dyslexic, in one of the best public schools for students with learning differences, only to watch her struggle. Her personal experiences got her thinking more deeply about some of what she was seeing through her work at New Profit: “We had been investing in more accountable education assessments, and every time organizations started talking about standardized tests, I thought, ‘That would have had

no relevance to me because I'm dyslexic. *I'm not in that data.*” I knew at a macro level that we were pushing forward [on education, generally]; but as an individual, thinking about my experience and my daughter's ... the hunch I was having was that our education system wasn't working. We needed to open up the problem, understand it more holistically.” When Kirsch shared this with people at the Tower Foundation, their eyes lit up: “How funny you say that. We recently revised our four areas of focus and learning disabilities is now one of them,” stated executive director Tracy Sawicki. With that, a partnership was born.

Around the same time, New Profit had been exploring more collaborative, networked ways of working. “What we had seen was that if you bring funders and social entrepreneurs together in a room, there's organic space for collaboration and experimentation as long as they're not working on exactly the same thing,” Sehra says. With this top of mind, New Profit and the Tower Foundation set out to determine how they might support diverse learners—by building a network. During the summer of 2012, they conducted a feasibility analysis on a set of issues (learning differences [LD], mental health, social emotional development, and substance abuse) that they believed mainstream education reform inadequately addressed but had tremendous impact on students' academic and life outcomes.

The discover phase itself can feel circular, fueled more by questions and a sense of wondering than by clear direction or firm convictions.

This exploratory work resulted in a resonance in the connection between learning differences and social emotional development. “What we were learning from conversations with people on the ground was that while the underlying causes for a child may be different for LD versus SEL challenges, the *manifestation* of these challenges is hard for an

educator to distinguish,” Sehra explains. This meant that it’s often very hard for an educator to understand if a child’s difficulty reading, for example, is rooted in trauma which has flooded her brain with cortisol, affecting all kinds of executive function skills in the moment and over time, or because she was born with dyslexia. “We heard that over and over again from the practitioners, and even from people specialized in this work in various fields,” she adds. “And it’s not just about the manifestation of the challenges. The supports that you provide for a student struggling with LD or trauma are pretty inextricably linked.” The more New Profit and the Tower Foundation realized how closely linked these fields were on the ground, the more they realized that staying lodged in a conversation of one versus the other would never yield fruitful new ground.

Beyond this early hunch that there was something to be done at the intersection of these particular issue areas, New Profit believed in the power of combining diverse perspectives to drive innovation and create new solutions to old problems. “When you only have one issue area at play, two things happen,” Sehra says. “One, the people in the room are competing for funding from the same funders, even if they have different models. And two, for similar reasons, the organizations aren’t different enough to create that spark of innovation. They already operate and think too much in the same world.”

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With agreement on the combination of LD and SEL (hence the de facto name “The LDSEL Domain”) as the focus and additional funding from the Oak Foundation and the Poses Family Foundation, the network launched in early 2013, with our team at Monitor Institute by Deloitte on board. This

formal launch, however, was only the next step in the continuous iteration characteristic of the *discover* phase: How do we make sense of the problem, the (multiple) fields, and the people in them?

In order to crack the question of where to focus, we needed to understand the sandbox we were playing in. This is a prototypical first move for network builders: Start by understanding the system you are trying to change. As Heather McLeod Grant writes in her RE-AMP case study: “Many nonprofits and funders take on an issue they care about without fully understanding the larger system in which they are operating: the underlying causes of the problem, the levers needed to effect change, or the other players in the space. As a consequence, many programs end up only tackling one small piece of a larger puzzle, in isolation.”⁴⁸

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

We started by mapping the ideas and prevailing research on the key cognitive skills, social emotional competencies, and areas of content and academic knowledge that are important for any child to have to succeed in school and life. We knew that it was critical to understand our context in order to strategically

connect to a larger set of activities already underway, but we also knew we had some exploring to do at this intersection of “cognitive and SEL,” as we called it. An analysis of the intellectual landscape at the time helped us begin exploring this interstitial space between LD and SEL, illuminating where

Reimagine Learning might be able to contribute and ultimately laying the groundwork to create new meaning as a group (see the “Knit” section for detail on the eight participant-led working groups we eventually launched and content developed). It’s a key first step when trying to reframe old problems and create new ground.

From the earliest days, it was essential that this process was cocreative—of, by, and for the people in the nascent network. If you’re creating a map of a new landscape, best to create it with the people who are actually going on the journey. To involve them, we conducted extensive interviews to draft our initial map of “cognitive and SEL competencies” and then invited them to put their fingerprints all over it: At the network’s first convening, participants took up their markers and sticky notes to edit, reframe, and revise our emerging picture of the competencies needed for students to succeed.

As we mapped the landscape of ideas (the *what*), we also began to map the people and organizations attached to them (the *who*). For example, who were the influential players in the fields of LD, SEL, and trauma? How was the emerging network connected to them? Should we be fostering new connections, and if so, how? With the fund’s formal launch, we had an initial group of committed practitioners, funders, and researchers, identified and brought to the table through earlier research and New Profit’s convening power. This gave us our starting point,

but *who* should be involved beyond this initial group and what the group should be focused on were in constant conversation—and iteration. As we got smarter about the lay of the land, we invited others to join us who helped to fill gaps and bolster knowledge and practice areas. As our ranks grew, we gained a different perspective on how Reimagine Learning might play in this complex issue area. And outward the circle expanded.

Inviting people into this new community, however, was about more than just who was working on the most relevant ideas. New participants had to come curious and ready to go on the journey with us. As Sehra notes: “We wanted the revolutionaries—the people who may have formal but also have informal influence in the space, the ones who may not necessarily be accepted in their world but are talking about collaboration, defying the current narrative, and creating a new narrative.”

What about the change agents? Why would they want to get involved in something so ambiguous, so *messy*? For many, it was a sense that the emerging ideas could align powerfully with their own organizational work. For others, it was an opportunity to be a part of something bigger. As the group began to coalesce, our ongoing analysis helped us develop a clearer picture of the complex problem we wanted to tackle. But to determine just what that *something* was would require the group to roll up their sleeves and get deeper into the mess.

Know

Understand differences. Discover similarities.
Cocreate new possibilities.

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



- What are participants' aspirations, viewpoints about barriers to success, and thoughts about potential solutions?
- What are the relevant activities and "camps" we need to understand? How do we reconcile differences? How do we surface commonalities?
- How are key stakeholders connected, and how can connections be strengthened?
- What future state of the system does the group envision? What greater story could bind the group together?
- What is needed to advance the ideas behind which the group is rallying?

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

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

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

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

The Reimagine Learning network spent many months working to coalesce behind a story they could all believe in, which would ultimately allow them to reorient their organizations behind it in powerful and impactful ways. But developing a collective vision can be a painstaking endeavor. It is human nature to cling to organizational perspectives and finely tuned theories of change that have served one well in the marketplace for financial, human, and reputational capital. Asking a leader to shift her worldview and try on other potential perspectives is not always simple. As Bob Cunningham, executive director for learning development at Understood, notes of those early days of the network's formation: "At first, everyone in the room was organization-driven. They weren't thinking big-picture, at a field level. Everyone was coming more from a competitive standpoint. People believed strongly that their way was the right way. These people had never seen eye to eye and were all wondering what they were going to do together."

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

Or as Balfanz puts it: "Everyone was looking through the same camera, but the angles were all

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

To create a more complete and compelling picture, one with complementary angles, our job became to assume the role of diplomatic negotiator, shuttling among the different participant camps, highlighting where there was more commonality than difference, discovering and respecting the ground that could not be surrendered, surfacing greater potential. This required a process of authentic engagement, deep listening, and rigorous analysis to build the evidence and generate a storyline that allowed key players to see possibilities they had been unable to see before. It's also a process that takes time and patience and, if bypassed or given short shrift, risks building future efforts on a shaky foundation. As Harald Katzmaier and Chet Tchozewski state about network construction, "the greater the amount of shared identity, of values and goals that partners have in common, the stronger the network will be ... It's hard to give up one's own old tribal story, but working in a larger network requires members to feel part of a new common identity."⁹⁹

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

Developing an effective network strategy depends on a collective understanding of what future may emerge—a future in which any strategy will need to exist. Scenario planning is a highly effective tool to do this. Scenarios are rich stories about tomorrow that can drive better decisions today. They are hypotheses, not predictions, that describe a range of possibilities for the future; they invite people to create imaginative narratives that are still plausible and logical, and that stretch thinking in new ways.²⁰

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

The focal question for the day was a deceptively simple one: “How might the education landscape change or evolve over the next 15 years?” Through

preconvening interviews, the group had surfaced a host of critical uncertainties—those factors seen to be both most important and most uncertain in shaping the future education landscape. Segmented into five key categories, these uncertainties became the building blocks for the six teams’ 15 scenarios of possible futures. They also became important externalities the group needed to have on its collective radar as we advanced. These are changes in the broader environment that are primarily independent from, yet could influence, our work.²¹

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

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

ideas, and strategies going forward.

But perhaps the biggest impacts of this scenario planning effort were the almost-imperceptible chinks in the intellectual armor that started to

form, and the slight but perceptible willingness to begin to broaden and integrate perspectives. “The 20th-century education system was never designed around how learning happens,” stresses Pam Cantor, Turnaround for Children’s founder and current senior science adviser. “One of Reimagine Learning’s biggest accomplishments was to name that—and to name that there were people working in their separate universes and trying to tackle a piece of the puzzle. Each organization provided a lens—a compelling lens, but just one—into this problem. How do you get all of these people to see that their lens should be, ‘How does my organization support the development of the whole child?’ That to me was the destination, and Reimagine Learning was an inaugural step toward it.”

At the highest level, the Reimagine Learning network aspired to create learning environments that could address the holistic and context-specific needs of each individual student, enabling every child’s optimal cognitive and social emotional development. The network mobilized around three core beliefs underlying this goal:

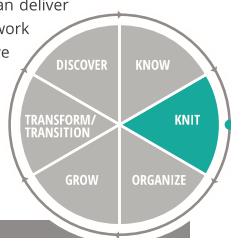
- “There is no such thing as the “average learner,” so instructional approaches should be personalized to support differing talents and needs.
- While both cognitive and social emotional skills are important, the best learning environments are ones that recognize that these skills are inextricably linked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

These three core beliefs would allow the group to start to “know” itself in a different way. Stitching them together helped participants, most of whom tended to focus on one or two of the beliefs in their own work, see how all three worked in concert with one another. As uncontroversial as those beliefs may seem now, they were indisputably hard-won in 2013. They represented an aperture-widening perspective by the group on the challenge at hand—and, more importantly, allowed the group to move one step closer to shared action.

Knit

Deepen strategies. Learn by doing.

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



- Which network participants have interest and bandwidth to lead? What is the most effective way to engage them? What coaching and support might they need?
- What does the network hope to accomplish? Why now? How does it plan to achieve its vision and monitor progress?
- What is the target audience the network will serve/influence? How large is this population?
- Which areas are ripest for action? What would an experiment look like? Which assets could be tapped to make it successful?
- What type of support is needed to advance the group's work?

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

—Vanessa Kirsch, founder and CEO, New Profit

To make collective progress, embrace the intellectual humility of uncertainty

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

2013, with the network united around a set of core beliefs, the Monitor Institute by Deloitte team was supporting eight participant-led working groups to help advance the group's goals. (See sidebar, “Working through working groups.”) While the number of active working groups and the rigor of their collective effort is impressive, more so was the commitment to explore together new knowledge and possibilities.

In aligned action efforts, there's an elusive but essential juncture that needs to be reached—that place where an organization's individual intent and mission aligns with the collective will and agenda. For it is when that juncture is forged that true collaborative traction can be gained and opportunities realized. “By creating many working groups, the collective honored the work of each organization,” reflects Cunningham. “They gave everyone a sense of the different levers that were possible.” The working groups allowed individuals to find for themselves that important intersection from which deeper commitment to the collective effort was gained.

Undoubtedly, a critical success factor in the working groups' success was the active engagement of leaders from the education field as working group leads—working together in multiple sessions between the networkwide, in-person convenings to develop ideas to then take back to the larger group for additional input and refinement. This cross-pollination of people, ideas, and perspectives became the catalyst to develop new ideas and lasting relationships. The process designed over the *Knit* phase created the space for participants to engage with each other's ideas—sometimes conflicting and competing—respectfully: “The promise I saw at the time was the opportunity to learn from people who were much more deeply steeped in some of these issues than I was,” Pam Cantor acknowledges. “The exposure to Todd Rose”—then faculty member of Harvard Graduate School of Education, author of *The End of Average*, founder of the Center for Individual Opportunity, and early network participant—“David Rose from CAST, and other network members changed my life forever.”

WORKING THROUGH WORKING GROUPS

Complex Learner. Informed the network's broader thinking about the students “slipping through the cracks,” as well as sizing work to quantify this population

Culture Change. Explored strategies for changing the way people understand themselves in relation with each other and the world—both in terms of beliefs and behaviors

Fortified Environment. Developed a framework for what constitutes a strong and sustainable environment for teaching and learning

Learner Profile System. Explored guiding principles and design elements for a new tool for learners

Measurement, Learning, Evaluation. Developed a point of view around how to understand and track network impact

Regional Impact Strategy. Clarified goals and objectives for the regional impact strategy, explored options for how the domain could come together, and defined conditions for entry into a geography

Policy. Developed policy strategy and operational advocacy plan at the federal and state levels

Network Strategy. Refined the network's plan for impact and general operating strategy and structure

As such, it wasn't just an exposure to new ideas through the many working groups that proved to be the primary catalytic force for the network—it was, rather, the deep and lasting relationships forged through shared commitments to create something better than any leader or organization could have done on their own. It's a sentiment echoed by Eye to Eye founder and CEO David Flink: "There really was magic in the people. The work and structure around us made a huge difference, but there was something special about the way people showed up. We showed up wearing our org hats, but we knew we all needed to win together to win individually. So people were there to give something, not take something. And what they got was 10 times in return. That was definitely true for us."

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

COMPLEX LEARNER WORKING GROUP

In aligned action efforts, developing a shared vocabulary to bind a group is often one of the first critical steps to take. From the early days of Reimagine Learning, we made explicit the different perspectives of the members. We named the areas of overlap and divergence so we could then begin to understand where common ground may lay. Each organization had its own perspective of the nature of the problem, defined its target student populations in different ways, and used different programmatic models. It was a disorienting—yet powerful—configuration. The efforts of the Complex Learner working group became the intellectual glue to help the network gain traction. Network members differed in

the definition of the child they sought to serve, using a range of factors such as a student's age, learning profile, and socioeconomic background as definitional means. Until the group developed a shared definition of *who we serve*, any discussion around implementing solutions would be derailed before it even left the station. "The population needs to be defined," stressed James Wendorf, network participant, working group member, and then-executive director of National Center for Learning Disabilities. "We know intuitively that 'complex learners' goes beyond the 20 percent of kids with learning and attention issues. Doing this work will let us move beyond our pigeonholes."²²

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

The group worked hard to incorporate leading-edge insights from neuroscience that helped to illuminate connections among the different target populations the network served. They started to recognize an opportunity to learn from and scale innovations taking into account both the brain-based and environmental factors that influence the cognitive and social emotional development of different types of learners. This notion of a complex learner began to emerge, particularly in contrast to the "simple schools" where these learners often found themselves. The working group leads—Don Deshler, Mary-Dean Barringer, and Chris Gabrieli—drafted a one-page definition to bring back to the network for input. The group defined a complex learner as one whose profile evidences vulnerabilities in one or more of these factors: opportunity for learning, disposition for learning, neurodevelopmental integrity for learning, preferences for learning—or when a student's learning profile is mismatched to the instructional environment provided.

While this definition served more for internal alignment among network participants than for external purposes, it helped galvanize the group

behind the emerging groundswell at the time around a more holistic view of whom they collectively served. "We actually agreed on what we know of now as the 'whole child,' but then, we came at this from different perspectives, which we had to work really hard to reconcile," notes Balfanz, a member of the Complex Learner working group. "If you went with only SEL or only LD, you wouldn't have had the tension and deliberation and adversity, which made for a pretty interesting learning context. Ultimately, the network provided access to cutting-edge information and thinkers that helped reinforce the fact that our strategy and work needed to be grounded in what students need."

With a working definition of whom to serve under its collective belt, two additional questions began to emerge that the Complex Learner working group took on: How can we better understand the range of students behind the *complex learner* definition and prioritize within this? And fundamentally, how big is this population? To bring to life the range of complex learners, the Monitor Institute by Deloitte developed a set of eight student personas using human-centered design approaches to illuminate their backgrounds, desired experience, attitudes and beliefs, and behaviors. We shared the personas at a convening and led the network through a prioritization exercise. With "real" personas front and center, the group was able to have a different kind of conversation about whom to prioritize and why. Importantly, the personas illuminated the ways in which the complex-learner variables often came together in single individuals and intuitively highlighted for the group the prevalence of complex learners in low-income communities, where opportunity for learning and instructional environment tends to be disproportionately affected. This conversation was a breakthrough—together, the network had

created something that members could all get behind: prioritizing *complex learners from low-income families*.

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

This agreement led us to conduct a sizing analysis to understand the magnitude of this population.²³ We utilized four categories of data for the purposes of sizing complex learners—students who have an identified learning disability, have an unidentified/unaddressed learning and attention issue, are English language learners, or have experienced trauma (as defined by three or more adverse childhood experiences²⁴). Using this data, we found that there were between 10.5 and 14.1 million school-aged complex learners living in low-income families. This number accounted for 44 percent to 59 percent of young people in low-income families and 19 percent to 25 percent of *all school-aged children in the US public education system*.

It was a radical wakeup call for the network participants, leading to three immediate realizations. First, at 44 percent to 59 percent of all young people in low-income families, participants understood that there is a significant overlap between complex learners and low-income communities—and, therefore, the group could no longer afford to think of these as two separate populations. Rather, they needed to advocate for and develop interventions that recognize and solve for the multiple realities of these students. Second, at 19 percent to 25 percent of *all* school-aged children, the network felt it had uncovered a group that was hardly marginal when it comes to size but was nevertheless often relegated to the margins of our current education system.

In other words, the network's vision for learning could serve and immediately benefit a significant population of students. And last, focusing on this population allowed the network to take a "targeted universalism" approach. If member organizations were able to develop student-centric learning and teaching environments that can genuinely help students who struggle and are poorly served, then they would ultimately be able to serve all kids more effectively.

FORTIFIED ENVIRONMENT WORKING GROUP

With a definition of *whom* the network could serve emerging in one working group, another focused on what would constitute the most effective environment to support that student. The Fortified Environment working group included a range of organizations galvanized to advance a unified theory of action.²⁵ This group aimed to define a set of attributes and practices that described a fortified environment with the power to mitigate the specific risks to development and learning associated with poverty and promote student development and achievement for all students. They worked together over weeks to draft a prototype grounded in the fields of child development, neuroscience, social emotional learning, and evidence-based transformational practices of high-performing schools.

The common belief underpinning this group's work was the recognition that developmental variation among children is the norm, not the exception. If you accept that premise, then you cannot deny the reality that few American schools were designed to support learner variability. The network afforded the group the time, space, and support to unpack this belief and develop a collective solution. "If you go way back to the beginning of Reimagine Learning, it was a precious moment where people were allowed to step back and question what we knew about how learning and development happens," reflects Pam Cantor, lead of the Fortified Environment working group. "Children rarely ever have just one thing going on. The systems in which our

children grow and develop, particularly if they grow up in adverse environments, really don't get development and developmental variability. I was deeply disturbed by schools that categorized, stigmatized, and sorted children—based on race, gender, culture. All of this runs counter to everything we know from the science about what develops a whole child."

Cantor adds a personal reflection based on an intuition that evolved through the course of this work: "When I think back to who I was at the beginning of Reimagine Learning, I was keenly aware of the developmental issues around trauma. I was aware that under-resourced schools and communities don't do right by kids. I had an intuition that this kind of integration that Reimagine Learning was trying to achieve by getting people to focus on the learning and SEL side of the equation was a good thing—and a move in the right direction."

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

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

environments in all schools serving high concentrations of students growing up in poverty."²⁶

Creating a unified theory was admittedly an audacious endeavor. The group recognized that there were existing "bright spots" of optimal learning environments; the problem was that these exemplars were rarefied and subscale, with the potential to benefit many but accessible to only a few. So the challenge became how to take things that were rare and expensive and make them affordable and accessible: the definition of disruptive innovation, and the true endeavor underlying the network's efforts. "We should think about the idea of innovation from

the edge," Balfanz stressed at the time. "Trying to change all education in the country is daunting. But if you can do the best of LD and SEL education in high poverty, it's like creating the 'New York theory'—if you can do it there, you can do it anywhere."²⁷

We know that networks can foster innovation and interventions. They can serve as important spaces for, as Kirsch framed it, people to "muck around for a while to get to the open-minded stance necessary to be aligned in action." Creating collective knowledge—while understanding that can only be gained by working together—is no small task. For the participants of Reimagine Learning, this "mucking around" together became a key ingredient for moving into action.

WHEN PREPARATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY

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

In 2013, Reimagine Learning formed a policy working group, composed of a cross-section of network members representing more than 40 organizations, led by America Forward and advised by policy consultants from Public Impact, the Education Counsel, and the Penn Hill Group. While there were no major K-12 federal policies under Reimagine Learning's watch at the time, the group focused on preparation for the moment key legislation might emerge.

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

Continued ›

WHEN PREPARATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY (CONTINUED)

It was then that preparation met opportunity: In 2015, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was presented for reauthorization by way of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).²⁸ Sehra describes the act as “the single most significant piece of K-12 federal education legislation.” More than “just a technical document about funding streams and allowable uses of dollars,” ESEA has served since its inception in 1965 as a “strong, collective commitment to equity,” a “critical stake in the ground about what we collectively aspire to do through education.”²⁹

Reimagine Learning saw in ESSA an opportunity to put into law everything it had learned about “what will truly move the needle and do right by kids.”³⁰ “ESSA provided an opportunity to redefine the Federal role in K-12 education for a new generation of students,” according to America Forward’s K-12 education policy platform, and to bring back “authority to States and local districts to drive policies and practices aimed specifically at their unique student populations, while at the same time maintaining Federal guardrails to ensure that all students are afforded the opportunity to succeed.”³¹

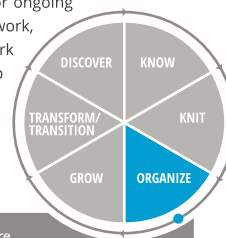
Acting quickly to seize this opportunity, America Forward began translating the working group’s framework into a platform for ESSA reauthorization and working with like-minded advocacy groups and policymakers in both the House and the Senate. In December 2015, Congress passed ESSA, incorporating many parts of Reimagine Learning’s platform, including a “multiple measures” provision (to create space to expand the definition of what matters beyond English and math standardized test scores), a competency-based assessment pilot, and innovation funding, to name a few. These provisions provided incentives for states and districts to put into practice Reimagine Learning network’s core belief in the importance of creating learning environments that are personalized to meet each student’s differing talents and needs and are designed to drive the development of both cognitive and social emotional skills.

Groh attributes much of Reimagine Learning’s policy success to the preparatory work done through the working group and the America Forward Coalition: “It paints a powerful picture of how having the right expertise at our fingertips allowed us to act when there was a policy window.”

Organize

Moving from curiosity to action.

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



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

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

—Ellen Moir, founder and former CEO, New Teacher Center

To deepen organizational capacity, nurture individual curiosity

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

Much of the thinking around Reimagine Learning’s “platform strategy” at the time was influenced, as Sehra underscores, by Steven Johnson’s book *Where Great Ideas Come From: The History of Innovation*,³³ which explores concepts such as ecosystem engineers, liquid networks, the adjacent possible, and the power of slow hunches. “Johnson talked a lot about the power of platforms as hubs for innovation. Our interpretation of this was that we could stack innovations on top of platform organizations like Teach For America, New Teacher Center, Achievement Network, and City Year,” shares Sehra. Working with and through organizations with significant scale and reach—suitable platforms—was key: “Their size and operational stability afforded them room to play and innovate with something they might not have previously been focused on. If New Teacher Center, for example, could do something for diverse learners across their

whole network, serving 2.5 million students annually, we realized this would be a powerful place to focus our strategy.”

But capacity isn’t something that simply crystalizes in perfect form with the signing of a capacity-building grant. It needs to reside within the more foundational beliefs of that organization’s people and become seamlessly integrated into the model. This meant that in order to develop the capacity of platform organizations to serve diverse learners, we needed to move leaders and their teams along a critical change continuum.³³ More importantly, we needed to support leaders not just in the development of new ideas but in how to distribute those through their own organizations.

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

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

FIGURE 3
How a mindset shifts



Source: New Profit.

resourced. Ultimately, from capacity comes action and experimentation.

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

Arguably, the work the group did together through the proceeding three stages of the network’s evolution—exploring a knowledge frontier, developing a shared narrative, building a common vocabulary, identifying collaborative activities—was about moving through this continuum in different ways. By 2018, Reimagine Learning had invested in 25 social entrepreneur-led organizations totaling US\$15.6 million serving approximately 7 million students nationwide.³⁴ Each of these organizations was actively investing in building internal skills and capabilities to support diverse learners, as defined by the network, and piloting innovative practices to better serve these students. In addition to the collaborations between the network’s grantee organizations, there were an impressive 309 “formal collaborations” launched between network organizations, as reported by evaluators Research for Action in its 2017 report.³⁵ While the impact of these collaborations is not a focus of this case study, it speaks to the influence of the network more broadly, which the following section explores more deeply.

ONE LEADER AND HER JOURNEY TO CHANGE

But just what does it take for a leader to take the journey along this change continuum? And how does that leader succeed in the critical act of translating personal instinct into organizational focus? What follows is one story of the journey that a leader in the network took along the path from curiosity to capacity, and provides us insight into the nonlinear,

messy, hard work that goes into the broad-sweeping notion of system change.

Mora Segal, CEO of Achievement Network (ANet), understood the opportunity—and the challenge—inherent in this journey. ANet is an organization that supports educators through formative assessments and data that help teachers understand what instructional moves will help advance student learning. It was one of the network’s first grantees. In 2012, as a US\$14.7 million organization serving 107,000 students in 351 schools, ANet was in the early stages of developing its coaching and assessment models to take into account the variability of students. Leaders were still grappling with a set of questions, as Segal notes, that were at the level of “nuance and intentionality” in their capabilities: How to develop assessments that truly allow every student to show what they know and what they can do? How do you design a model that gets a whole school approach right? How do you turn hard-to-gain data into actionable information?

It was in this moment that Segal both recognized a blind spot and realized an opportunity: “There was an opportunity to seize upon the moment of the education reform movement that used language such as ‘all kids’ and talked about ‘high expectations’ and to really unpack who we actually were serving and who we weren’t serving in an ‘all kids agenda.’” To really define a clear set of values and shared definition of what we meant when we said ‘all kids,’” she says. Segal also talks about needing to find that critical juncture in aligned action efforts in which an organization’s mission connects with the collective intent, discussed in the *Know* section. “I had to get to clarity as to why this work around understanding the needs of diverse learners mattered through the context of my own organization’s mission. How do I fit all of these conversations into a logical frame? I had to work hard to make sense of all the different angles and perspectives in the room as we went into multiple rooms together over multiple months. There was some healthy jockeying for individual perspectives of what mattered most.”

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

to execute is “one of the hardest things to do as a leader.” For her and her team, this translation started with a small commitment to launch a pilot in a set of schools to test a new coaching approach for teachers working with students with learning and attention issues. In addition to the pilot, they formed a “mind trust” to track what was happening and ways to adapt their assessments and coaching services, in order to begin to more deeply embed this thinking and way of operating in the organization. The initial results were impressive. In one of the three pilot schools, with high percentages of students with learning and attention issues, ANet’s interventions showed dramatic 28 percent one-year percentile gains in English language arts; and the interim data ANet was able to provide to teachers enabled them to “differentiate instruction across groups of students” in powerful new ways.³⁶

What also resulted was a need to acquire funding to support innovation: “We were building commitment through a group of folks in the organization, and we soon realized that the work we needed to do in the capacity phase was not funded,” Segal acknowledges. The commitment ANet was demonstrating gained it a grant from the Poses Family Foundation, one of Reimagine Learning’s network funders, to continue to develop their capacity. ANet launched an online formative assessment option to take advantage of technology innovations that were fostering better ways to assess the depth of student learning. This would help ensure that students could show what they actually know and not get “watered down by complexity in the actual assessment structure itself,” as Segal puts it.

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

How does all this add up to change on the ground and affect everyone’s desires to see? The work around redesigning assessments is one complex step. Another is the development of effective and actionable reporting derived from those assessments so that teachers can understand where a student is making progress and where they need support. This is a formidable data infrastructure project that ANet, now a US\$30 million organization reaching 330,000 students in 938 schools, continues to work on to serve student subgroups that traditionally have been lost in a “tragedy of reporting in our country.”

Segal is a no-nonsense leader with an unwavering devotion (and unyielding curiosity) to understand how she can keep pushing the bounds of ANet’s work. Sehra offers a keen insight on Segal’s role in the network and the qualities of a leader that allowed her to flourish in this setting where ambiguity and cocreation were more the norm than defined end goals and clear mandates: “Mora was initially skeptical of the work of Reimagine Learning. But she *always* walked in with curiosity, recognizing that there was some reason all the people in the room were so interested in exploring this frontier. Even if she had a different notion, she tried to understand different perspectives. That curiosity was the first step to a mindset change.”

What this story, among the many within the network, gives us is affirmation of the power of more intentionally coordinating intent and aligning action among people and their organizations. Networks, such as Reimagine Learning, can become engines to drive a range of interventions in the field. These interventions can add up to a *portfolio of change efforts* that can work at different altitudes of change, over different timeframes, with different types of outcomes. With Reimagine Learning, some were formal and planned efforts. Others emerged from the hundreds of informal and unplanned collaborations that the network engendered. This idea of aligned action also underpinned how the network would think about its own “threads of influence” and network impact, which we review in the next section.

CAN A NATIONAL NETWORK MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN A LOCAL COMMUNITY?

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

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

Take a back seat. Set partners up for long-term success. On-the-ground work *must* be responsive to on-the-ground needs. “Busy teachers and administrators cannot be expected to run learning laboratories for philanthropic foundations, however well-intentioned they may be,” says Sawicki. In addition to being responsive to *what* communities need, it’s critical to account for *how* this work should be delivered, ensuring the work is sustainable once the dedicated facilitators and funding are gone. To do this, engaging community members and empowering local leaders is key (see “An Educator’s Guide to Community-Engaged Strategic Planning” for details on how Reimagine Learning did this³⁷). “We made a decision at the very beginning to be back-of-the-room facilitators so school districts could own the work,” Feinberg says.

Create feedback loops with the broader network. Reimagine Learning’s regional work brought values of the network and some of its people (such as the faculty advisers in the Essex County Learning Community³⁸) into new places, but a more explicit connection—and opportunity to share learning—was often lost between the “40,000-foot” work of the network and the on-the-ground work happening in Salem’s gymnasium or the superintendent’s office. As Sawicki reflects, “I don’t think we infused enough of the resources of the network in our regional work. For instance, how do you feed the capacity-building lessons from the districts back to the network? How do you engage the network in seeing its work? That feedback loop was missing.” One way Reimagine Learning addressed this was by hosting a panel of the regional leaders at their national convening. While it was well attended, the leaders acknowledged that this kind of cross-sharing could have happened sooner and more often.

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

Grow

Grow the group. Increase impact.
Build tighter connections.

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



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

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

—Ashley Sandvi, Poses Family Foundation

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

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

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

Luckily, at that time, others were paving the way in advancing the field's capacity around network impact. In their 2014 “Framing paper: The state of network evolution,” Network Impact and the Center for Evaluation Innovation outline the unique aspects of networks that make their evaluation particularly complex:³⁹

- Networks have numerous players, many of whom enter and exit the network.

- Networks are dynamic “moving targets” that adapt, often rapidly, to changes in their context or changes among their membership.

- It takes time to organize networks effectively and show results.

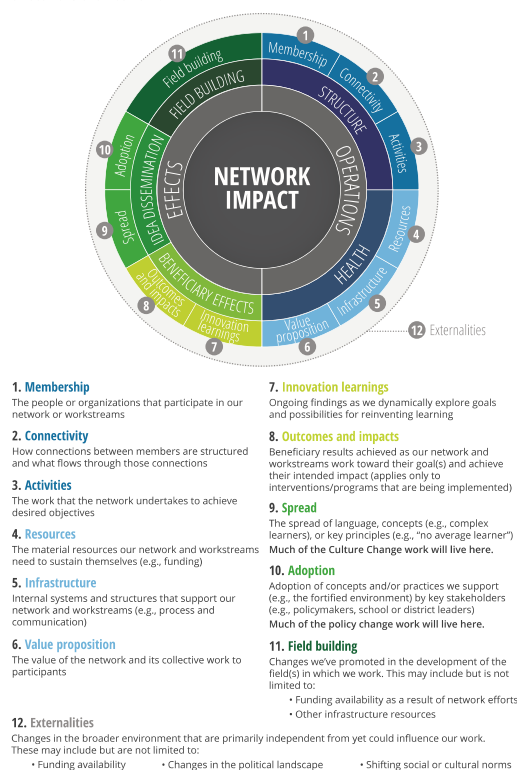
- Networks have a “chain of impact”—that is, networks impact their members, members impact their local environments, and members combined impact their broader environment.

- Network shape and function matter.

Networks have a measurable value that is not limited to outcomes and outputs, and measurement should be used to attend to them. What participants get out of a network, how efficient it is at creating value for participants, how sustainable it is, and the influence it generates all matter. And these factors need to be tracked. With all this in mind, Reimagine Learning knew that it had to find its own way around these challenges if it wanted to improve and strengthen the group's collective work. The working group was guided by a clear goal of developing a measurement framework (defining *what* to measure) and a road map for gathering evidence (defining *how* to measure) that would be useful in decision-making. The group explored questions such as: Who will use the *monitoring, evaluation, and learning* (MEL) framework, and how will they use it? What are the key decisions that need to be made, and what information is needed to make those decisions? Through this exploration, the group developed an MEL framework (see figure 4), adapted from Network Impact and the Center for Evaluation Innovation, to fit the network's unique needs.⁴⁰

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

FIGURE 4

How effective is the network?

Source: Reimagine Learning Network, adapted from Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation framing paper "The state of network evaluation" (2014).

THE FRAMEWORK HAD TO SERVE A RANGE OF AUDIENCES.

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

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

THE FRAMEWORK HAD TO REFLECT THE NETWORK'S SPECIFIC PURPOSE.

Reimagine Learning was meant to do just that: *reimagine*. It was about innovation and spreading that innovation to a broader field, what we call learning at scale.⁴ So how to reflect this purpose in our MEL framework? In addition to adding measure No. 7 to monitor and evaluate our own innovation, the working group wanted to explicitly capture the system-level effects the network would have *beyond the aggregated effects* of the individual organizations. To do this, we added measures for idea dissemination (both *spread* and *adoption*), which was particularly relevant to us because of the creation of new concepts such as complex learners and *field-building effects*, such as whether we could track new or additional funds allocated to these ideas/interventions and other infrastructure resources.

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

We also knew that monitoring externalities—changes in the broader environment that would inevitably affect the network's efforts—a measure that often gets left out of MEL even if people are doing it implicitly, would be important as we continued to adapt and grow. This is why doing scenario planning with the group (see the "Know" section) was one of our first endeavors as a collective. It was, in fact, an act of monitoring externalities as we surfaced a broad set of trends and futures. It was important to name this need in our framework—not to suggest that we had to conduct a scenario planning exercise every time we were together but that we did

have to continuously evaluate the environment in which we were operating if we wanted to change it. As elusive as systems change can seem to be, it can be quite concrete: How do the rules change? How do mindsets change? How do funding flows change? Reimagine Learning was a network purpose-built to promote innovation and system-level spread of those innovations, and its measurement framework had to reflect that.

THE FRAMEWORK HAD TO SERVE A RANGE OF TIME HORIZONS.

Distinguishing between all 12 of these measures was also especially important because we know that some measures are more relevant to certain time horizons than others. For example, when we were in the early *Know/Knit* phases, we knew we needed to measure network *membership* and *connectivity* to assess the network's structure and establish a baseline for future comparison. (To support this, we conducted an in-depth social network analysis. See the "Playbook" for details.) But it wasn't until later, in the *Organize* phase, that we began to see (and thus could measure) *innovation learnings*, *outcomes*, and *impacts*, such as the development of the Optimal Learning Environment tool at the New Teacher Center and the resulting outcomes for their teachers and students (see the "Organize" section for more detail). And it wasn't until we entered the *Grow* phase that we could begin to understand

Of course, the six phases in the Network Lifecycle are not precisely linear, and the associated measures aren't either. You may see some *innovation learnings* emerge before you've quite figured out what the right infrastructure will be. And even when you're several years into network efforts, you'll probably still be monitoring *membership* and evaluating the network's *value proposition*. Like all things with networks, measurement requires patience, iteration, and constant sensemaking. But just as networks *broadly* follow the arc of the Network Lifecycle, measures—what you're able to see and assess—also *broadly* follow the network's evolution from left to right on our MEL framework. And of course, there's nothing about *field building* that happens overnight.

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

New Profit and the opportunities to collaborate with their peers informally and formally.

The network study reported significant growth in the number of people participating in the network in some way and significant collaboration among network members, including new formal partnerships and funding relationships. It revealed that network members valued different ele-

ments of network offerings (convenings, virtual learning sessions, etc.) and had varying perceptions of the network's purpose and value proposition

but showed strong alignment around Reimagine Learning's vision and three core beliefs. Finally, their analysis of the national dialogue on education topics highlighted an increase from 2012–2016 in use of terms related to Reimagine Learning (such as "social emotional learning"), suggesting an uptick in the broader movement of which Reimagine Learning was a part.

As we have revisited Reimagine Learning with participants six years later, we have heard stories of success across this framework. The more we talked to people, the more we realized that in addition

to the stories themselves—powerful in their own right—we were hearing a *pattern of connectivity*. Ideas and relationships had spread in ways we had not anticipated or even intended, highlighting the ripple-effect nature of working in a network. Figure 5 shows Reimagine Learning's "threads of influence," tracing the evolution of ideas and activities through the network—not to prove causality but to connect the stories we have heard and to shine a light on the emergent and unpredictable impact of network building.

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

spread, *adoption*, or *field building*. (See figure 5, "Threads of influence," for examples and quotes, color-coded to the MEL framework.)

FIGURE 5

Threads of influence

WE STARTED WITH:	WHICH TURNED INTO:	AND THEN:	AND THEN:	AND THEN:	WHICH GOT US:
A need to identify whom to serve and to better understand them	Created description of “complex learner” (see “Knit” section)	Developed student personas; led to agreement on which students were “in scope”	Sized complex learner population; discovered that one out of four students in public education system could be defined as such		Greater alignment on collective goal; clarity on value of working together to reach this population; data and tools to help tell the story externally
					Adoption of “complex learner” idea by other organizations—e.g., the Gates Foundation integrated language of vulnerable populations into new strategies, based on RL’s sizing analysis
Pam Cantor’s (Turnaround for Children) vision for an integrated model to support the whole child	Launched working group and developed fortified environment prototype (see “Knit” section)	Ellen Moir (New Teacher Center) integrated thinking into a new tool: the Optimal Learning Environment			Launched new practices integrating research behind the Fortified Environment to support students and teachers
		Turnaround revised strategy based on the fortified environment; published new research, the Building Blocks of Learning (by Brooke Stafford-Brizard)			Widespread sharing of concept—e.g., broadcast at CZI event on Facebook live (2016), where Jim Shelton of the DOE claimed, “We know, from the work of folks like Pam Cantor and the Building Blocks, that there are all these competencies and skills . . . things that actually can be taught very well . . . and set the foundation for the rest of a kid’s life” ²⁴
A desire to “change the culture” around learning differences and learner variability	Hired Propper Daley; started meeting with influencers and organizations in the entertainment industry, including Tobey Maguire, John Legend, William Morris Endeavor, and Entertainment Industry Foundation	Created a partnership with William Morris Endeavor	After William Morris Endeavor acquired modeling agency IMG, featured Reimagine Learning at Fashion Week	Fashion show from Public School (designer), talks by several Reimagine Learning members, and performance by John Legend, all in support of the network	Raised US\$1.5 million in conjunction with Fashion Week event; over 600 million media impressions in publications/TV, including CNN, CNBC, the <i>Boston Globe</i> , CBS News, the <i>Wall Street Journal</i> , <i>Education World</i> , <i>Huffington Post</i> , <i>Fortune</i> , and the <i>Chronicle of Philanthropy</i>
A need to build and cultivate a diverse network of individuals and organizations	Began convening 30 organizations meeting three times per year	Within 18 months, grew from 30-person convenings to 90–110; in 2015, started annual convenings, with 100–140 participants; over five years, held 13 convenings in total	To strengthen connections, launched communications effort, including network digest email, guest blog series, and “Voices from the Field” virtual learning series	Grew from ~500 network contacts in 2016 to more than 700 in 2018; over 200 unique network members have joined the “Voices from the Field” virtual learning sessions	An 800-plus-person Reimagine Learning network, with a circle of 150-plus people deeply engaged, according to 2017 network survey
					Created “air cover” for organizations to expand their work to support variable learners—e.g., City Year’s new charter school designed to support a highly variable learner population

Continued >

Shifting a system

The Reimagine Learning network and how to tackle persistent problems

FIGURE 5

Threads of influence (contd.)

WE STARTED WITH:	WHICH TURNED INTO:	AND THEN:	AND THEN:	AND THEN:	WHICH GOT US:
The desire to build organizational capacity to serve Reimagine Learning's target population	Saw that many initiatives specifically focused on diverse learners were operating out of university settings with academic leads who were inexperienced in scaling organizations	Supported collaboration between KU-CRL and NTC. Realized the need to provide financial and capacity-building support for partnerships to work across the network	Created incubation grants to support startup organizations, partnerships between organizations, and internal initiatives at platform organizations		309 partnerships/collaborations formed among the 117 people who responded to the 2017 network health survey; collaborations range from organizationwide partnerships to organizations training others (e.g., Eye to Eye training City Year corps) to leadership collaborations—e.g., Jim Balfanz on the board of Eye to Eye and Pam Cantor on the NCLD professional advisory board
			Fostered connections across the network; sharing organizational profiles, facilitating "speed dating," engaging Vantage Partners to train the network on partnership best practices		
	Created the Practitioners working group (no funders present except New Profit) for organizations to explore issues in a safe setting	Supported the Practitioners working group in moving along <i>curiosity</i> to <i>capacity continuum</i>			Reimagine Learning's four largest grantees—ANet, City Year, NTC, and TFA—collectively serving 3.5 million students annually, increased their capacity to serve diverse learners Many participants (e.g., ANet, NTC, TFA, TFAI, and New Classrooms) gained additional funding to support learner variability initiatives
Identified policy as one of Reimagine Learning's three levers for change	Created a policy working group, led by America Forward, to define RL's policy priorities	Policy principles ratified by the network and the America Forward education working group	Converted group's policy principles into a platform specifically focused on ESSA reauthorization	With ESSA and federal policy trending toward state-level action, created a partnership with CCSO Innovation Lab Network	Several elements of ESSA advance work of Reimagine Learning by adopting network policy elements; CCSO ILN Equity Working Group released paper on Personalized Learning with Equity ⁴⁴
Intention to support Reimagine Learning organizations working together in a region	New Profit dedicated specific resources to pursue regional impact	Searched for districts that had change agendas and effective leadership	Lawrence Public Schools emerged as a candidate; then-superintendent Jeff Riley requested qualitative study about the Acceleration Academies, an intervention responsible for much of the success of the district turnaround	Reimagine Learning produced "The Golden Ticket" for Lawrence, a multimedia case study that codified the innovative Acceleration Academies intervention	A new 501(c)(3) organization, the Sontag Prize for Urban Education, was launched to celebrate outstanding educators and help spread the Acceleration Academies beyond Lawrence. ⁴⁴
			Salem mayor and superintendent asked New Profit to facilitate Salem Public School's strategic planning process	Yearlong, community-engaged strategic planning process resulted in a plan that continues to guide the work in Salem Public Schools; "An Educator's Guide to Community Engaged Strategic Planning" created to codify learnings from Salem for the field	New partnerships formed—e.g., Salem's participation in the <i>By All Means</i> initiative at the Harvard Education Redesign Lab; SPS engaged with Big Picture Learning; potential partnership with Power My Learning— and new program launched: City Connects, implemented across the district
			Essex County Learning Community created to spread best practices; six school districts selected by RFP to participate in an eight-month process of learning how to better meet the needs of diverse learners; national "faculty" of eight Reimagine Learning affiliated advisers serve as design team and visiting experts to six districts	District Lead Teams and Teacher Topical Teams met monthly; action plan developed from each district on how to better meet the needs of diverse learners, includes utilizing Reimagine Learning experts	ECLC gaining visibility statewide: Riley delivered remarks at final ECLC 1.0 event; Essex County Community Foundation brought additional funding to ECLC; Identification of a new "market": smaller suburban districts undergoing significant demographic changes—and facing new challenges

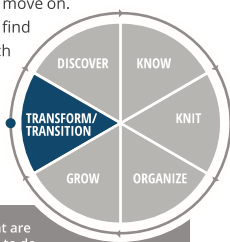
Source: Deloitte analysis.

Transform/transition

Assess the whole thing and why it matters.

In this phase, we examine the network and the issue area itself to understand what has worked, what hasn't, and what the value of the network could be going forward. In some cases, the network may have accomplished its goals, so the participants decide to move on.

In others, the issue itself may have shifted, or we find that the external environment has changed, in which case the network might want to shift its focus, membership, or structure in order to tackle the problem in new ways. This is where the cyclical nature of the aligned action life cycle becomes especially relevant, as evaluating what's next often means discovering something new.



- Has the network had its intended impact? What are the implications for what the network chooses to do together going forward?
- Has the nature of the problem and/or the solutions evolved?
- How much agreement exists among participants about the purpose and function of the network at this point?
- What other efforts exist and could/should the network connect with them? How will connections enable growth of the movement?

“In the end, it seems that mastery has less to do with pushing leverage points than it does with strategically, profoundly, madly letting go.”⁴⁵

—Donella Meadows, environmental scientist, teacher, and writer

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

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

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

New Profit is now focusing on integration in education at three levels: across the education continuum (early childhood, K–12, postsecondary), between those “supplying” learning environments (schools, educators, nonprofits) and those “demanding” them (students, families, communities), and across fields within education and youth development. They are doing this through three core competencies, as informed by many of the lessons they learned through

Reimagine Learning and from others: supporting capacity-building, exploring the cutting edge of innovation, and continuing to find new and better ways to support partnerships and collaboration—all the while maintaining a focus on equity and integrating communities in the work.

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

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

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

— Tracy Sawicki

It was a sentiment echoed by Flink: “To see folks step away from their own missions and let others unabashedly, with excitement, steal, borrow, trade

practices—that has been amazing. Our success in terms of the impact we're having in schools has skyrocketed since we came into Reimagine Learning. It's not because we're doing work better internally. It's because we're taking practices we learned from Reimagine Learning and embedding them in our work. And I know we're not the only ones, because I've worked closely with other Reimagine Learning partner organizations and seen it happen with them as well." And so, Reimagine Learning lives on—in its organizations and the young people, families, and educators they serve; in the policy changes the collective still pursues; in the relationships formed; and in the shifts that have gotten us that much closer to reimagining learning for all students.

Reimagine Learning was but one of many efforts in play at the time focused on shifting an entrenched system. But it was an effort that took a deliberate tact to change mindsets of key leaders in that system, coopting Donella Meadows' "playbook" for changing paradigms: "How do you change paradigms? You keep pointing at the anomalies and failures in the old paradigm; you keep speaking louder and with assurance from the new one; you insert people with the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power. You don't waste time with reactionaries; rather, you work with active change agents and with the vast middle ground of

people who are open-minded."⁴⁰ This is precisely what Reimagine Learning came to understand: If the network could change the mindsets of the individuals operating in and around the existing system, begin to point out anomalies and failures, and provide assurances from a new way of thinking, it could slowly start to change the system.

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

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

Reimagine Learning timeline



2012

- New Profit and the Tower Foundation share a recognition that the status quo is insufficient to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Leaders look to create a community of funders and practitioners to support students with learning disabilities and social emotional learning challenges.

2013

- The Oak Foundation and the Poses Family Foundation join as cofunders alongside the Tower Foundation and New Profit, originally creating a US\$28 million, five-year fund. Six initial grantees are funded US\$1 million+ each to advance their work with diverse learners: ANet, Eye to Eye, New Classrooms, New Teacher Center, Peace First, and Turnaround for Children.
- Thirty-two participants convene to kick off the "Learning Differences and Social Emotional Learning" network, the initial name for Reimagine Learning.
- Members align on a set of core values and a shared narrative, which would guide the network's efforts.
- Leaders create and support seven working groups (see sidebar, "Working through working groups").
- The network members achieve consensus on a new term, *complex learners*, to describe the target population the network is trying to serve.

2014

- Leaders further define the network's target population and conduct a sizing analysis to understand the magnitude of that population, revealing that 44 to 59 percent of children in low-income families are complex learners and that 19 to 25 percent of all school-aged children are complex learners from low-income families.
- The network takes the new name *Reimagine Learning* to capture the call to action that embodied the motivation of network members.
- Leaders develop a *monitoring, evaluation, and learning* framework to better understand the different dimensions of the network's success.
- Reimagine Learning begins awarding one-year, US\$100,000 incubation grants to continue fostering innovation and expand the number of organizations and type of work the network formally funds.

2015

- Reimagine Learning announces its public launch at Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in partnership with entertainer John Legend, generating 604 million impressions for Reimagine Learning worldwide and US\$1.5 million in additional funding for the network.
- Leaders launch the Practitioners working group, convening nonprofit practitioners from grantee organizations and the broader network to work together on key capacity-building challenges.
- The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation joins as a core funder for the Reimagine Learning network.
- Reimagine Learning partners with superintendent Jeff Riley of Lawrence Public Schools, launching the network's first regional initiative in Essex County, Massachusetts.
- New Profit's nonpartisan policy arm America Forward secures key provisions on language regarding learning differences and personalized learning in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.

- 2016**
- Leaders affirm and rearticulate the definition of “who we serve” to encompass English language learners and students of color after Grad Nation report calls out these populations as among those whose learning needs are most critical to impacting graduation rates.⁴⁷
 - Reimagine Learning collaborates with Salem, Massachusetts, public schools and superintendent Margarita Ruiz to develop a community-driven strategic plan, a new Essex County initiative.
 - The network shifts to a once-a-year convening cadence and launches new communications tools to maintain connections between in-person convenings: a monthly guest blog series and a monthly network digest newsletter
- 2017**
- Research for Action conducts impact studies to understand how the field has changed, how grantees have been affected, and how the network as a whole has been affected.
 - Reimagine Learning launches the “Voices from the Field” learning series, in which leaders from the network share how to create teaching and learning environments that unleash creativity and potential in all students.
 - The original five-year fund officially closes; New Profit plans for a transition year in 2018 to develop a strategy for the next phase of K–12 education work while continuing key Reimagine Learning network activities.
- 2018**
- New Profit receives support from the Tower Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York for ongoing activities in grantmaking and capacity building, network convening and communications, policy advocacy, and regional initiatives in 2018–19.
 - Leaders launch the Essex County Learning Community, a regional initiative that brings together Essex leadership teams and teachers to build district capacity to support diverse learners in six districts across the region.
 - Reimagine Learning receives 83 applications for incubation grant investments focused on learning and attention issues and makes US\$100,000 investments in six organizations making meaningful gains for the one in five students with learning and attention issues across the United States.

Methodology

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

We interviewed 16 members of the Reimagine Learning Network, practitioners and funders:

- Jim Balfanz, City Year
- Pamela Cantor, Turnaround for Children
- Bob Cunningham, Understood
- Jane Feinberg, formerly of New Profit
- David Flink, Eye to Eye
- Sharon Grady, New Teacher Center
- Sarah Groh, formerly of New Profit
- Helayne Jones, formerly of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- Vanessa Kirsch, New Profit
- Ellen Moir, formerly of New Teacher Center
- Ashley Sandvi, formerly of Poses Family Foundation

- Tracy Sawicki, Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation
- Mora Segal, ANet
- Shruti Sehra, New Profit
- Gisele Shorter, formerly of Turnaround for Children
- Jenée Henry Wood, Transcend Education, formerly of Teach For America

We documented and archived the work of Reimagine Learning over the years of our involvement. We reviewed 360 files developed for convenings, working groups, interviews, analysis; these documents represent the vast body of knowledge and work the network generated.

To anchor our understanding in how the evolution of the Reimagine Learning network mirrored other efforts driving systems change, we drew on the Reimagine Learning impact report developed by New Profit, Monitor Institute by Deloitte’s own writing and experience with aligned action efforts, Research for Action’s third-party evaluations, and a scan of existing literature around network theory and action.

FIGURE 6

Research learning questions	
Motivations for joining the network	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why did you join Reimagine Learning initially, and what kept you coming back?• What experiences or opportunities did you identify in which coming together was more effective than making progress independently?
The process of developing a shared narrative for Reimagine Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What was the process like for you to develop a shared narrative for Reimagine Learning?• Were there beliefs/perspectives that you had to give up or shift away from?• What did you gain during that process?
Defining moments for the network	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What were some of the critical moments when things shifted in positive ways (e.g., traction gained or commitments forged)?• What were some of the biggest challenges for you personally?
Influence of the network on the member organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In what other ways did Reimagine Learning affect your organization and you?• How did it change, if at all, your approach to partnerships or how your organization works?• How did your paradigm of "what it takes" to serve a complex learner change as a result of Reimagine Learning?• What does it take to sustain that paradigm shift?
Measuring success	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What were some of the "invisible threads of success" (those success stories we can't clearly see or measure) in the work over the years?• How is the world different today because of Reimagine Learning?• Where did the network stumble or fail to reach its potential?

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Aligned action playbook

FIGURE 7

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

Phase	Move	Description	So what
All	Convening	Gathered network participants in person (three times annually in the first three years, followed by once annually in following years). Activities varied based on network phase but generally included a mix of relationship building and content sharing and creation.	Strengthened ties across the network; enabled cocreation in real time; and sparked further collaboration.
Discover	Landscape mapping	Captured <i>what</i> was happening in the <i>learning differences</i> and <i>social emotional learning</i> fields (e.g., existing cognitive/SEL frameworks; competencies described in <i>How Children Succeed</i>), as well as <i>who</i> was and should be part of our growing collaborative—e.g., “billboards” showing where the organizations work, populations served, etc.; graphical depictions of how focus areas intersect.	Confirmed the opportunity for aligned action at the intersection of the <i>learning differences/social emotional learning</i> fields and began to clarify how this group of people and organizations might move forward as a collective.
Know	Scenario planning	Identified “critical uncertainties” that might affect the education landscape in the next 15 years (through extensive pre-interviews with participants) and facilitated the network through an activity to play out those uncertainties in different possible futures (scenarios).	Drove the network toward shared understanding of priorities given possible futures; began to broaden and integrate perspectives on “the problem” and build collective identity.
Know	Shared narrative	Synthesized the network’s priorities, experience, and values into three core beliefs they held in common. These beliefs became the foundation for the group’s shared narrative for change, capturing what the group stood for and how they would effect change.	Bolstered collective identity and served as a north star for the group’s work.
Knit	Working groups	Organized network members into various working groups to advance activities and general network development (see sidebar, “Working through working groups”). Network members typically self-selected into working groups, which were supported by network facilitators.	Deepened participant investment in the network and produced collateral to support the network’s goals (e.g., <i>fortified environment</i> prototype, policy platform, culture change strategy).
Knit	Site visits, student panels	During convenings, scheduled time to visit sites where network members were working/invited students, educators, and parents to participate in convenings.	Made the work “real” and helped incorporate beneficiary voice into discussions and point of view as a network.

Continued »

FIGURE 7

Select moves made by network facilitators (New Profit, Monitor Institute by Deloitte) to support the network, by phase (contd)			
Phase	Move	Description	So what
Knit	Flipbook	Developed a short, colorful flipbook describing the network's shared narrative for an external or unfamiliar audience.	Solidified the story of "who we were" as a network in an easy-to-share format for current and potential members and other relevant stakeholders—funders, policy makers, etc.
Knit	Student personas and sizing analysis	Depicted narrative portraits of different types of students the network could serve (based on configurations of variables from the <i>Complex learner</i> paper, see the "Knit" section for details) and facilitated the group through process to select highest-priority types. Once identified, conducted analysis to estimate the size of this population in the United States.	Brought students "to life" in new ways, allowing the network to make choices about who we were and were not targeting; quantified the size of this population, helping make the case for the importance of serving these students.
Organize	Social network analysis	Mapped connections across the network; depicted connections visually and shared with the network for discussion and action.	Served as a baseline for measuring network structure and health in the future; identified clusters of strong and weak connections.
Organize	Advisory board	Engaged key funders and a subset of other leaders in the network (social entrepreneurs, thought leaders, policy influencers, etc.) to advise on the direction of our collective work.	Helped Reimagine Learning prioritize and focus, evolve its target population (e.g., using inputs such as the 2015 Grad Nation report to expand the student populations we aim to serve), shift focus (e.g., shifting from serving the needs of diverse learners to serving the diverse needs of all learners), and shape its approach to network engagement and impact measurement.
Organize	Practitioner working groups	Convened practitioners (operating non-profits) to work together on capacity-building challenges.	Helped participants move along the "curiosity to capacity" continuum (curiosity, commitment, mindset shift, capacity) for serving diverse learners through their organizations.
Grow	MEL framework	Adapted framework for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning to track the network's progress over time, reflecting the network's specific purpose. See the "Grow" section for details.	Aligned the network on a broader definition of success, including the full spectrum of network operations and network effects (versus only outcomes and impacts for beneficiaries).
Grow	Regional impact strategy	Created high-level strategy for bringing the network to a place, including defining the network's goals and aspirations for place-based work, along with possible models for collaboration with districts.	Launched inquiry into place-based work, which would ultimately evolve into work with Lawrence, Salem, and Essex County, Massachusetts.

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Endnotes

1.

For more detail, see Deloitte, *Aligned action: Organizing for system change*, accessed March 26, 2019.

2.

See "When Preparation Meets Opportunity" for an overview of Reimagine Learning's policy work. Number of school districts taken from the National Center for Education Statistics, "Number of public school districts and public and private elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1869–70 through 2010–11," accessed March 26, 2019.

3.

Reimagine Learning represents many breakthroughs: a breakthrough in how to think about whole-child development and reorient education reform to reflect that understanding, a breakthrough in leveraging the power of a network to coalesce around and move forward shared goals and actions, and a breakthrough in New Profit's understanding of how to approach and measure systems-level change. To reflect on its impact, New Profit has chronicled the breakthrough story of Reimagine Learning that shares key outcomes and lessons learned within each the four core areas of Reimagine Learning's work—grantmaking and capacity building, policy advocacy, network engagement, and regional initiatives. These stories are available on the New Profit website, <https://www.newprofit.org/breakthrough/reimagine-learning/>.

4.

Statistics on dropout rates (Table 126), reading proficiency (Table 143), math proficiency (Table 161), and bachelor's degree attainment (Table 14) taken from Thomas D. Snyder and Sally A. Dillow, *Digest of education statistics 2012*, National Center for Education Statistics, December 2013.

5.

Nadine J. Burke et al., "The impact of adverse childhood experiences on an urban pediatric population," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 35, no. 6 (June 2011). "Adverse childhood experience" is a measure developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which refers to 10 types of childhood abuse and neglect that can affect later-life health and well-being. For more information, see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)," April 1, 2016; Poverty statistics taken from National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of education statistics 2012*, Table 25.

6.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations come from interviews conducted by Monitor Institute by Deloitte for this case study in the fall of 2018. See "Methodology" for details.

7.

Sarah L. Pettijohn, *The nonprofit sector in brief: Public charities, giving, and volunteering, 2013*," Urban Institute, accessed March 26, 2019.

8.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. See: CASEL, "What is SEL?," accessed March 26, 2019.

9.

The notion of a "slow hunch" comes from Steven Johnson's book *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* (New York: Riverhead, 2010). Johnson argues that breakthrough ideas tend to come from gradually maturing slow hunches, rather than "Eureka!" moments.

10.

New Profit.

11.

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12.

Ibid.

13.

Christian Seelows and Johanna Mair, "Mastering systems change," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Fall 2018; Sarah Stachowiak and Lauren Gase, "Does collective impact really make an impact?," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, August 9, 2018.

14. Anna Muoio, Noah Rimland Flower, and Kaitlin Terry, "Engage: How funders can support and leverage networks for social impact," Monitor Institute and Rockefeller Foundation, July 2015.
15. Heather McLeod Grant, *Transformer: How to build a network to transform a system: A case study of the RE-AMP energy network*, Monitor Institute, Fall 2010.
16. Ibid.
17. Diana Searce, *Catalyzing networks for social change: A funder's guide*, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and the Monitor Institute, Winter 2012.
18. Grant, *Transformer: How to build a network to transform a system*.
19. Harald Katzmaier and Chet Tchozewski, "Networks, money and meaning," *Alliance*, December 1, 2012.
20. For a useful resource on scenario planning for nonprofits, see: Diana Searce and Katherine Fulton, *What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits* (Global Business Network, 2004).
21. An understanding of externalities is an element in the *monitoring, evaluation, and learning* framework that we would eventually develop for the Reimagine Learning network; see the *Grow* section for more information on how we think about network impact.
22. James Wendorf, as stated during November 2013 convening in Los Angeles.
23. The network agreed to focus initially on "school-aged complex learners living in low-income families"—children ages 5–17, from families with annual income of less than US\$44,700.
24. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)."
25. CASEL, City Year, American Institute for Research (AIR), Communities in Schools, New Teacher Center, Harvard University, and KU Center for Research on Learning, to name a few.
26. Excerpted from "Fortified teaching and learning environment: A prototype," developed by a Reimagine Learning working group.
27. Jim Balfanz, as stated during March 2014 convening in Washington, D.C.
28. US Department of Education, "Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)," accessed March 26, 2019.
29. Shruti Sehra, "What it takes to ensure every child achieves," *Huffington Post*, June 2, 2015.
30. Ibid.
31. America Forward, "American Forward on K–12 education," August 2016.
32. Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From*.
33. Developed by New Profit.
34. New Profit.
35. Research for Action, in its memo "Reimagine Learning network survey analysis: Perspectives from participants," defines formal collaboration as "organizations working together over time with a shared goal, through means such as building or delivering shared programming, securing funding, or collaborating to raise awareness on an issue."
36. Reimagine Learning advisory board meeting, November 2017.
37. Reimagine Learning, "An Educator's Guide to Community-Engaged Strategic Planning," <http://educatorsguide.newprofit.org/>, accessed April 19, 2019.
38. Reimagine Learning and the Center for Collaborative Education, "2018 Essex County Learning Community," accessed March 26, 2019.
39. Network Impact and Center for Evaluation Innovation, "Framing paper: The state of network evaluation," July 2014, pp. 4–5.
40. This MEL framework, adapted from CEI's work, was developed specifically for Reimagine Learning and its needs, goals, purpose, and configuration. The group identified important aspects to consider in the framework, such as idea dissemination, field building, externalities, and, particularly, innovation learnings. These were important measures for this type of network focused on systems change, promoting innovation and a key set of ideas in the field.
41. For more detail on "learning at scale" (and how Monitor Institute by Deloitte is thinking about measurement in the social sector), see Monitor Institute by Deloitte, *Re-imagining measurement: A better future for monitoring, evaluation, and learning in the social sector*, 2017.
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