Executive Summary

At the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we believe every student deserves a great education—regardless of their background, ZIP code, or race—because a great education is key to social and economic mobility. One of the most important lessons we’ve learned during our 15 years of investing in K-12 education to advance this belief is that the most effective solutions in schools are the ones that best meet the unique needs of each student and address the complex challenges within a school system that can slow or prevent improvement.

This insight led us to fund our first cohort of Networks for School Improvement (NSI), announced in August 2018. The 19 organizations in this cohort will support groups of middle and high schools as they use a continuous improvement process to significantly increase the number of Black, Latino, and low-income students who earn a high school diploma, enroll in a postsecondary institution, and are on track in their first year of college to earn a credential with labor-market value. The NSIs will solve common problems using approaches that best fit their needs, learning what works as they go and refining their approaches.

We are proud of the expertise, diversity, and commitment to equity in these 19 organizations. All of them are focused on improving student outcomes, but their networks differ in size and will track progress.
across a range of academic indicators. These organizations come from 12 different states and represent nonprofits, school districts, charter management organizations, and community partnerships. Forty percent of the grantees are new partners for the foundation, and 40 percent identify as minority-led organizations—both characteristics that we greatly value.

As a foundation, we have learned much from the nearly year-long journey to funding this first cohort of NSI grantees. Through a Request for Information (RFI) we issued in the fall of 2017, which yielded 278 responses, as well as a subsequent Request for Proposals (RFP) issued in January 2018, we gained deep insights into the field’s current work and future goals and needs around continuous improvement in schools.

To better understand areas for improvement, and to ground our improvement in evidence and data, we combed through all the available data from the RFP process, interviewed successful and unsuccessful applicants to understand their experience, and debriefed with all members of the K-12 team and our contractors and advisors who were involved in reviewing applications. We have reflected on the key aspects of strong applications and identified ideas for improving and strengthening our future RFPs. We know from feedback how important it is for us to remained committed to being transparent and informative in our communications with RFP applicants.

Looking ahead, the foundation is eager to support the first cohort of NSI grantees as they learn from each other in a community of practice and help their network schools continuously improve how they serve students. We also appreciate learning from the field how we can best support all continuous improvement efforts, and we look forward to helping to build the capacity of organizations focused on constantly improving, so that all students have access to a great education.

**THE GRANTEE SELECTION PROCESS**

In October 2017, we issued a Request for Information (RFI) to learn from intermediary organizations and secondary schools about the work they have done, or would like to do, that uses continuous improvement methods to improve outcomes for Black, Latino, and low-income students. We deeply analyzed the 278 responses we received, which shaped and informed our first Request for Proposal (RFP), issued in January 2018. The RFP invited applications to target a set of student outcomes and indicators which we believe are predictive of high school graduation and postsecondary success. We also focused on seeking applications from minority-led organizations and organizations that would be new partners to the foundation.

In August 2018, we announced 19 NSI investments, including 15 partners selected through the RFP process and four existing partners that we had committed to fund before the RFP launched. See below for a timeline of the RFI, RFP, and grantmaking process, as well as a list of our first cohort of grantees.

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**Fall 2017:** RFI

**Feb. 2018:** RFP closed

**March/April 2018:** Interviews

**April 2018:** Site visits

**May/June 2018:** Proposal development

**Aug. 2018:** Grants awarded
For brief summaries of each investment, see Appendix A.

Achieve Atlanta: $532,000, 24 months [Atlanta, GA]

Baltimore City Public Schools: $11,160,000, 48 months [Baltimore, MD]

Bank Street College of Education: $700,000, 16 months [Yonkers, NY]

California Ed Partners: $12,000,000, 61 months [California]

Center for Leadership and Educational Equity: $560,000, 20 months [Rhode Island]

City Year: $520,000, 18 months [Milwaukee, WI]

Communities Foundation of Texas: $503,000, 15 months [North Texas]

Community Center for Education Results: $515,000, 24 months [South King County, WA]

CORE Districts: $16,000,000, 61 months [California]

High Tech High Graduate School of Education: $10,300,000, 60 months [Southern California]

Institute for Learning: $7,400,000, 60 months [Dallas, TX]

KIPP Foundation: $499,000, 23 months, [Multiple States]

Network for College Success: $11,700,000, 60 months, [Chicago, IL]

New Visions for Public Schools: $13,900,000, 60 months [New York, NY]

Northwest Regional Educational Service District: $586,000, 24 months [Northwest Oregon]

Partners in School Innovation: $499,000, 15 months [Philadelphia, PA]

Seeding Success: $560,000, 24 months [Memphis, TN]

Southern Regional Education Board: $3,300,000, 36 months [Jefferson County, AL]

Teach Plus: $619,000, 23 months [Chicago, IL and Los Angeles, CA]
OVERVIEW OF THE FIRST NSI COHORT

The cohort of grantees that emerged from our January 2018 RFP represents strengths in many of the areas that we learned are critical for successful networks. Based on our learnings from the RFI, we identified several key characteristics that guided us in determining the first cohort of NSI grantees.

FOCUS ON EQUITY

Respondents to the RFP demonstrated a clear commitment to equity and leveraging continuous improvement processes to dismantle systemic and structural disadvantages that exist in school systems.

FOCUS ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

All grantee organizations measure success in student outcomes—specifically those that research indicates are predictive of high school graduation and postsecondary success. To ensure we can learn about an NSI’s impact across the array of on-track outcomes and indicators, we seek balance and variation across the middle school to postsecondary spectrum. In our funded cohort, middle school on-track rate is the most frequently proposed outcome to be addressed by NSIs [9], followed by 9th grade on-track rate [8]. The RFP applicant pool was weighted similarly. Significantly fewer NSIs [3] will focus on the transition to and persistence in postsecondary education, including college access, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary on-track rate. Our next RFP will target only applicants proposing to focus on these indicators, while our spring 2019 RFP will welcome proposals targeting all outcomes and indicators.

DIVERSITY OF INTERMEDIARY TYPE

We seek to understand the extent to which organization type may be a variable in an NSI’s success and impact—and how that might be relevant to any efforts to scale. The grantee organizations represent a range of intermediary types, and therefore will be able to demonstrate different approaches to building school buy-in, collaborating with local community partners, and, for our non-district and charter management organization (CMO) grantees, developing strong partnerships with districts and CMOs.

DIVERSITY OF NETWORK SIZE AND SUPPORTS

The first cohort of grantees comprises seven Type 1 and 12 Type 2 grantees; each type represents different network sizes and capacities [see here for definitions of Type 1 and Type 2 grantees]. We also seek to understand the extent to which working within a single district, across multiple districts within a state, or across state lines has an impact on an NSI’s success and on student outcomes. Eight members of the NSI portfolio plan to work with schools that are all located in a single district; nine plan to work with schools across multiple districts or CMOs within a single state; and two NSIs plan to work with schools across multiple states.

CONTENT EXPERTISE

The organizations in our first cohort have internal content expertise or strong partnerships to facilitate the proposed NSI’s work. In the case of Type 1 grantees, they have both internal expertise and partnerships. We are, however, open to very strong proposals working with intermediaries, so long as that intermediary can prove that their model has an impact on student outcomes.

KEY ATTRIBUTES OF STRONG APPLICATIONS

The information shared with us through the RFP enriched our understanding of the improvement work in the field. We want to share back some of the consistent attributes of strong applications we saw across the applicant pool in order to support intermediaries who are currently doing continuous improvement or want to pursue NSI-type work. We were impressed by the range of applications that exhibited the following characteristics and look forward to future applications and seeing networks in action that build upon these strengths. Our strongest applications:
Were attentive to the key elements of continuous improvement, including short iterative cycles of improvement, collaboration, stakeholder involvement throughout the entire process, shared and distributed leadership, clear outcomes and indicators, and timelines to accomplish stated outcomes and indicators. We appreciated seeing specific plans that spoke to the involvement of school-level personnel (including teachers, students, and, at times, parents or community members) and district personnel to engage with high-leverage data in root cause analysis as well as ongoing touchpoints aligned to the problem of practice throughout the duration of the proposed project. In addition, the stronger applications presented plans and timelines in line with their clear proposed outcomes and indicators. Finally, applicants’ acumen for continuous improvement was often best illustrated by their description of their past experience implementing this process.

Had evidence of strong quantitative and qualitative data sources and had established data systems that could be easily accessed by a variety of system actors. Strong applicants provided clear examples of personnel and relationships needed to access and work with necessary data in alignment to their outcomes and indicators. Organizations were explicit in how they planned for ongoing data training for the network with a focus on expertise, providing experience, and developing capacity of its network members to sustain this integral component of the network’s success.

Were able to draw on existing place-based relationships. Established relationships included partnerships with school districts that spanned several years of support and months of pre-planning and support during school recruitment processes.

Displayed a strong commitment to organizational development, such as meeting frequently, cross-site and school team collaboration, and evidence-based testing. The applications illustrated that network members would be encouraged to participate in key decisions, and displayed a commitment to the testing process, grounded in evidence, to guide their improvement work. They also explicitly articulated the need to intentionally build the capacity of network members in order to achieve clear outcomes. By focusing on leadership and development around key aspects of the network, it was clear that these organizations considered the longevity and sustainability of the network’s work.

COMMON AREAS FOR CONTINUED LEARNING AMONG GRANTEES

Our first cohort of grantees represents a huge pool of talent with vast experience improving outcomes for secondary school students across the nation. That said, even these impressive organizations are focused on continuously improving and growing as intermediaries. To support their growth, we are conducting a needs assessment, which will help us get specific about the kinds of supports we will provide our cohort over the course of the grants. Still, we already know of some common areas for deeper capacity building across the board for both our Type 1 and Type 2 grantees.

- We plan to support our intermediaries in their efforts to execute root cause analyses and embed continuous improvement processes in the existing work and culture of their schools.
- We plan to provide both technical and expert support to the efforts of each network intermediary to identify the data they need for the specific problem they are trying to solve and to bolster their work with schools to access the short-cycle data they need for improvement.
- While many of our intermediaries have convened groups of school leaders and educators, many also feel challenged by the task of moving from convening to networking schools to accelerate improvement. We will be focusing our support on connecting and convening school teams to learn together—and specifically from each other.
To accelerate our grantees’ learning, we plan to work with the NSI cohort to launch a community of practice that has some face-to-face components (likely three in-person meetings per year, as a cohort of grantees), while sub-groups who share similar needs, goals, or characteristics will have the opportunity to meet “virtually” every other month. Technical assistance will be available to individual intermediaries or small groups of intermediaries with similar needs. We hope that grantee-to-grantee sharing will occur as groups coalesce around their similarities, leading to natural sharing of resources while building toward ownership of the community of practice. Finally, we hope to support grantees in visiting each other to learn on the ground and provide real-time feedback on areas where one intermediary is struggling and reinforce “positive deviation” where good practices proliferate.

LOOKING AHEAD

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT HOW BEST TO SUPPORT THE FIELD

The volume and quality of the RFP responses have led us to think about new ways—in addition to RFPs—we might support the field. We are looking into providing general supports to applicants who did not receive funding and we continue to mine the RFP data to understand what types of supports might best serve the broader field. In April 2018, we sent out a survey asking a group of applicants for thinking and feedback on where their organization can use more support to do their best work.

Overall, organizations expressed interest in building their capacity to support schools in identifying high-leverage areas that could benefit students and the corresponding school-level measures and data to help reach this goal. They were also interested in trainings on driver diagram development, opportunities to observe facilitation of large-group decision-making exercises, and methods for building the capacity of school-level staff to engage in root cause analysis. Finally, we heard loud and clear that the field is eager to see examples of continuous improvement in action and learn from others doing the work. They would like regular updates on the progress of this first cohort of NSIs.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN FUTURE RFPS

From our review of available data, interviews with successful and unsuccessful applicants, and debriefing with all members of the K-12 team and our contractors and advisors who were involved in reviewing applications, we gleaned these learnings that we will consider as we develop our next RFP. We will track and measure the efficacy of changes we implement based on this feedback and assess whether the change is truly an improvement before making it a permanent part of our selection process.

We will refine our approach to how we encourage more Black and Latino leaders to seek funding. We believe that it is important that organizations have leaders with similar backgrounds and experiences to the student groups with whom they work. While the standardized definition of minority-led organizations we used in our first RFP brought us closer to our goal of funding more organizations that look like and share the lived experiences of the students we hope to serve, we recognize that there is room for improvement.

What applicants were able to highlight was possibly way too dependent on the time we gave them to do this work.

- Gates Foundation staff
We wanted you to ask about the intersectionality of the work — equity as the lens and beginning point and the use of CI to support equity.  

- Applicant

We will ask applicants to write about what is unique about their work that is designed for the student population they are seeking to serve and how they will leverage continuous improvement to remove structures that perpetuate systemic disadvantages faced by these students. We screened applicants for a focus on Black, Latino, and low-income students, but in hindsight we should have asked for more information about whether applicants have served those populations specifically and differently in the past.

We will be more transparent about being open to different interpretations of continuous improvement models that are aligned with our core parameters. While each intermediary in the first cohort is taking a different approach to their implementation of continuous improvement methods, all organizations have demonstrated evidence of—or facility with—methods aligned to our continuous improvement core parameters. The diversity of approaches across our grantees builds upon what we heard from the field—that continuous improvement must be relevant and valuable to the schools in the network, not overly technical or outside of school goals.

We will ensure our next set of RFP questions and supporting materials are fully inclusive of districts. We received feedback that the RFP and related materials may have discouraged districts from applying.

We will develop a very crisp definition of Type 2 grants and a clearer application process before our next Type 2 funding opportunity in the spring of 2019. Several applicants told us that they felt pressure to apply for Type 1 funding even if they wanted to be Type 2 intermediaries [which have fewer schools in the network] and felt confused by the single track for funding, assuming we would only pick Type 2 grantees from the pool of unsuccessful Type 1 applicants.

We will continue to communicate frequently throughout the application process. Applicants told us they appreciated our communication style and encouraged us to continue to be transparent and informative. Applicants did not feel they waited too long for an update on the status of their application, but they said they would appreciate more time in between the different stages of the process.

We will minimize the heavy investment of time for applications. Applicants who made it to the interview round told us they spent 30 to 200 or more hours on the application process. Although we tested the application ourselves, wrote sample responses, and sought feedback from advisors, we underestimated the time and attention the RFP process required. With our next RFP, we will also pilot an eligibility quiz to double check that applicants understand exactly what we are looking for before they commit time to an application.
**APPENDIX A: COHORT 1 PROFILES**

**Achieve Atlanta** collaborates with Atlanta Public Schools (APS) to improve postsecondary access and success for students across all high schools. With their two-year grant, Achieve Atlanta will focus on understanding the role of postsecondary match and fit as a predictive indicator for student success; develop a tool to support the successful matching of APS students to good-fit colleges; and use continuous improvement to build capacity in schools in order to better support APS students in selecting, applying to, and enrolling in good-fit postsecondary institutions.

**Baltimore City Public Schools** (City Schools) serves over 80,000 students, the majority of whom are students of color and low-income. City Schools’ work will focus on improving 8th and 9th grade on-track outcomes, with a focus on literacy. They will increase teacher support with onsite literacy coaches in 12-15 middle schools selected as Literacy Intensive Sites as part of the district’s Blueprint for Success. In each school, expert literacy coaches will support teachers while using high quality, standards-aligned materials and continuous improvement strategies to accelerate literacy among middle and high school students.

**Bank Street College of Education** will work with 10 Yonkers Public Schools middle schools to increase the number of Black, Latino, and low-income students who successfully complete 8th grade math. Bank Street will support school-based math teams to create interventions to address inequitable student math outcomes, analyze data to track student improvement, facilitate inter-school collaboration, and conduct district-level planning meetings and school-level leadership training. This investment will also support Bank Street to improve their data collection and analysis capacity and develop high-quality networking experiences for school teams.

**California Education Partners** (Ed Partners) was founded in 2011 to seed and grow improvement collaborations among California’s small and mid-sized school systems, supporting districts and their schools to innovate, build, and sustain internal capacity as learning organizations in order to close gaps and lead high performing, equitable outcomes for all students. This grant will support Ed Partners to focus on launching and managing a network of up to 50 secondary schools across 18 California districts aimed at improving outcomes for Black, Latino, and low-income students. This initiative will also aim to build the capacity of Ed Partners, specifically to deepen its design, delivery, measurement, learning, and evaluation capacity.

**The Center for Leadership and Educational Equity** (CLEE) will serve as the intermediary for a 10 high school network in Rhode Island focusing on increasing the number of Black, Latino, and low-income students who complete a 9th grade college-prep math course. CLEE will support teams of students, teachers, and school and district leaders to identify equity gaps in 9th grade course completion, investigate root causes, and test interventions to address those causes. CLEE will also support teams to create a receptive culture for change in their schools.

**City Year** and Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Education will partner with school and district leaders serving predominantly Black, Latino, and low-income students in high need schools to determine structures, practices, and student support systems that will enable all students to complete 8th grade on-track to high school graduation. They will connect and convene leadership teams from 10 middle schools to develop their capacity for continuous improvement utilizing Early Warning Indicators and leverage innovative human capital, including AmeriCorps members, to help schools close opportunity gaps and advance school performance.
Educate Texas, a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas, will lead the Texas Network for School Improvement (TXNSI) Collaborative. The goals for the TXNSI Collaborative are to develop a regional network of schools that adopt continuous improvement processes to enhance capacity, accelerate change, and ultimately, increase educational opportunities and outcomes for Black, Latino, and low-income students. The Collaborative will develop and support 10 schools in North Texas focused on increasing the math proficiency of 8th grade students. In addition to Educate Texas, the Collaborative will be supported by Learning Forward and The Charles A. Dana Center. Learning Forward will bring their expertise in continuous improvement and the Dana Center will provide subject matter expertise and technical assistance around mathematics education and student success improvement.

Founded in 2010, the Community Center for Education Results (CCER) supports the Gates Foundation-funded Road Map Project, a regional effort to support student achievement from early learning to college in South King County and South Seattle. This grant will help CCER, in collaboration with the Puget Sound College & Career Network, expand the College & Career Leadership Institute. The institute works with South Seattle and South King County high schools to undergo system improvements so that more low-income students have a meaningful, high-quality plan for college and career. Ultimately, this investment will support progress toward the Road Map Project’s long-term goal for local youth: to eliminate opportunity gaps by race and income, and for 70 percent of the region’s students to earn a college degree or career credential by 2030.

Founded in 2010, CORE partners with California’s large, urban school districts to innovate, implement, and scale new strategies and tools to eliminate equity and achievement gaps for more than 1 million students. This grant will enable CORE to create an infrastructure capable of supporting long-term, data-driven continuous improvement work.

The investment focuses on launching an improvement community focused on improving 9th grade on-track rates, enhancing CORE’s data and improvement management systems, and sustaining the CORE-PACE research partnership to study and disseminate key lessons learned.

High Tech High Graduate School of Education will lead a College Access and Enrollment Network of schools in Southern California with the aim of increasing the number of Black, Latino, and low-income students who apply, enroll in, and ultimately go to a four-year college. Partnering with up to 30 schools, High Tech High plans to focus on four critical drivers of college matriculation: financial access, the college application process, fostering a sense of belonging, and reducing students’ failure to enroll even after they have been admitted.

For 20 years, the Institute for Learning (IFL) has worked with school systems nationwide to improve outcomes for underserved students. In partnership with Dallas Independent School District and the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Urban Education and the Learning Research and Development Center, IFL will support teams from 12 secondary schools to use continuous improvement to increase the number of Black, Latino, English learners, and low-income students who are proficient in English Language Arts and on track at the end of 9th grade for high school graduation. IFL and its partners will also support school and district leaders to lead continuous improvement efforts.

KIPP is a national network of public charter schools whose students have achieved tremendous results. With this new investment, KIPP will improve and refine the approach college counselors use at their high schools to help young people matriculate to and graduate from college. In particular, they will accelerate the development of practices, tools, and approaches that predict and increase college success for their students, and work on solutions to keep
high-achieving students from “under-matching” to
colleges that are less rigorous than they are qualified
to attend. Over 23 months, KIPP will leverage its
existing regional infrastructure to convene and
support its network of college counselors at its 31
KIPP high schools across 16 states.

**Network for College Success** will support a network
of 15-20 Chicago high schools to increase the number
of Black, Latino, and low-income students who are
on-track to high school graduation and earning a 3.0
GPA or better at the end of 9th grade towards the goal
of postsecondary readiness. They will do this by
building partner schools’ capacity to engage in cycles
of continuous improvement—testing which student,
teacher, and school interventions create the school
conditions that build upon the abilities, intelligence,
and creativity of Chicago’s youth.

**New Visions for Public Schools** (NVPS) works with
networks of public schools in New York City that in
total include more than 340 schools serving more
than 180,000 students in grades K-12. Through this
grant, NVPS will work with a network of up to 67 high
schools over five years to collectively design, imple-
ment, and test strategies to increase the number of
Black, Latino, and/or low-income students who
graduate from high school prepared to succeed in
college. NVPS will build school team capacity to use
data and continuous improvement to help more
students maintain competitive GPAs, succeed in
advanced coursework, and achieve college-ready
scores on state Regents exams.

The **Northwest Regional Education Service District**
(NWRESD) is the largest of Oregon’s 19 education
service districts, serving 125,000 students across 20
school districts. As a broker of resources and
services, NWRESD partners with districts, families,
higher education, and community-based organiza-
tions to enhance educational opportunities for
students. The NWRESD Deeper Learning and Equity
Network will support 32 regional high schools
through a continuous improvement process focused
on deeper learning and culturally sustaining pedago-
gies with the common goal to increase the number of
students who are on track by the end of 9th grade to
graduate.

Since 1993, **Partners in School Innovation** has
improved the student achievement of low-performing
schools serving predominantly low-income students
of color. With this grant, Partners will run a network
of 10 schools in Philadelphia to bring together middle
school math teachers, instructional coaches, and
principalsex to help students who begin the year below
grade level to rapidly catch up to their high-perform-
ing peers. In addition, Partners will strengthen its
capacity to connect schools in virtual communities
and its ability to capture and use classroom-level data
in the continuous improvement process.

**Seeding Success** is a Memphis-based partnership in
the StriveTogether national network of cradle-to-ca-
career collective impact organizations. Through this
grant, Seeding Success will leverage its strong
partnership with Shelby County Schools to support a
network of 15 feeder pattern middle and high schools
over a 24-month period to begin tracking 8th grade
and 9th grade on-track outcomes, identify root causes
of students who fall off track, and test aligned inter-
ventions through rapid improvement cycles to help
more students stay on track toward college and
career readiness.

**The Southern Regional Education Board** (SREB), a
long-standing partner, will launch a network of 10
secondary schools that will focus on increasing the
proficiency rates of Black, Latino, and low-income
students on 8th grade math and 9th grade Algebra 1
in Birmingham, AL (Jefferson County). Beyond the
scope of Jefferson County and rural networks, SREB
aims to build improvement science and cycles into its
existing national High Schools That Work and Making
Middle Grades Work networks.
Since 2009, Teach Plus has empowered teacher leaders to shift instructional practice and impact educational policy to improve student outcomes. With this grant, Teach Plus will run a network of 10 middle schools in Chicago and Los Angeles, working to increase the number of African American, Latino, and low-income students achieving proficiency in 8th grade math. As part of this grant, Teach Plus will partner closely with the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, using their evidence-based Change Management Framework to develop continuous improvement skills among the ten schools’ teacher leaders and principals.