NETWORKS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:
EVALUATION PLAN
The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is committed to ensuring that all students—especially Black, Latinx, and low-income students—have an opportunity to earn a degree that prepares them for a successful career and life. We’ve learned that the best answers don’t come from a one-size-fits-all approach but from empowering school leaders and educators to identify solutions that best fit the needs of their local community. Since 2018 we’ve made grants to 30 organizations working with networks of middle and high schools across more than 20 states to use data-driven approaches to continually improve their practice based on issues that they’ve identified.

We coined the phrase “Networks for School Improvement” to capture our hypothesis that when school teams are able to use continuous improvement approaches and learn from each other with the help of a supporting organization they will advance high school graduation and college success rates.

We’re committed to holding ourselves accountable for lessons learned from our Networks for School Improvement investments. In particular, we want to understand the conditions and mechanisms that make continuous improvement approaches more or less likely to work across diverse education settings.

So, we’re investing in three, interrelated activities: [1] grant and portfolio management to help us understand what networks are doing and how they are performing in real time, [2] a formative evaluation, conducted by the Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University, to help our grantees and the foundation staff learn about the emerging characteristics of effective networks and make adjustments as we go; and [3] a set of summative evaluation activities to understand the links between continuous improvement efforts and longer-term changes in adult practices.

The NSI evaluation focuses on three big questions

The foundation has learned from past investments that it’s not enough to know whether a particular set of investments yields results. To make long-term progress, the field and the foundation need to understand the nuances of what works, where, and under what conditions. So, we’re investing in three, tightly linked summative evaluation projects over the next four years designed to yield a cohesive set of findings focused on three big questions:

- **What makes for effective school networks and intermediaries (the organizations that support middle and high schools in their improvement efforts)?**
- **How do schools implement continuous improvement activities, and to what extent does participating in continuous improvement change educator practices and school support for learning?**
- **What is the impact of Networks for School Improvement on student outcomes?**

Our summative evaluation will be conducted by three separate, but collaborating, research teams to capitalize on the expertise of different organizations and scholars and to ensure we’re reflecting diverse perspectives and experiences based on our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This past summer and through a series of three design workshops, we brought together a range of academics, researchers, and NSI leaders to inform our evaluation design and plan to ensure the evaluation activities are maximally useful to grantees and the field. That experience allowed us to expand our thinking and to design evaluation activities that draw upon a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches and that bring research teams with different voices and experiences to the table.
There are two types of NSI grantees: NSI validation and impact grantees, who are already experienced in continuous improvement methods and networking and NSI model design initiation grantees, who are building their capacity to do such work. The summative evaluation focuses solely on NSI validation and impact grantees of which there are 21 and that number will grow.

What makes for effective networks?
RAND is leading this project, which also includes L’Heureux Lewis-McCoy, an associate professor of sociology at New York University who focuses on issues of educational inequality. The project will examine how networks and intermediaries evolve over time to support school-led continuous improvement efforts. It also will examine what characteristics make for effective networks and intermediaries across diverse student, school, neighborhood, and district contexts.

The project will collect and report data on all NSI validation and impact grantees. It also will look in-depth at a purposeful sample of nine NSIs chosen to reflect a range of grantees, based on key characteristics, such as: the student outcomes they’re focused on, the type of intermediary organization, and whether it’s a pre-existing network or a new network. In addition to research-based interviews, surveys, and document reviews of network, intermediary, and school-level stakeholders, one of the novel aspects of this project will be a social network analysis to understand how information and ideas flow between and among schools and individuals within each network. Does knowledge flow from individual schools to the supporting organization and then back out again, for example, or do schools communicate with each other more directly over time?

Another core component of the study is to understand how intermediaries and networks prioritize issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their work. For example, as part of their continuous improvement work, how do networks and intermediaries identify the root causes of inequity within their community? The researchers will work with intermediaries to understand the history and local context of schools and interview community stakeholders to see whether they are engaged with the network in constructing shared goals and action plans.

The researchers will report annually to the NSIs and the NSI Community, sharing, for example, whether results from the social network analysis match how each intermediary intended to connect schools and individuals within its network.
To what extent does continuous improvement change what is happening in schools?
American Institutes for Research is leading this project in collaboration with MDRC; Beth Gamse, a researcher with expertise in mixing large-scale descriptive and quantitative methods; David Liebowitz, an assistant professor of methodology, policy, and leadership at the University of Oregon; Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, the leader of education at Insight Policy Research; and Shanette Porter, the director of research and a senior fellow at the Mindset Scholars Network, who focuses on the role of schools in shaping students’ social, emotional, and motivational experiences.

The study will look at how continuous improvement approaches vary across schools and examine whether these approaches catalyze broader changes in how schools and school systems support Black, Latinx, and low-income students. The researchers will create an annual dashboard of existing data, along with visualization tools, to help schools, intermediaries, and the foundation understand how each school’s and network’s key activities compare, and reporting will focus on whether implementing continuous improvement approaches catalyzes shifts in educator practice. These findings, in turn, will inform the study of student outcomes, to understand which shifts in practice are more or less likely to make student outcomes improve. Case studies of 18 schools across the nine Networks for School Improvement case study sites, which will be carefully selected across key dimensions, will provide an in-depth understanding from the ground up of how continuous improvement teams routinize, internalize, and disperse their teams’ progress throughout their schools, communities, and networks.

What is the impact of Networks for School Improvement on student outcomes?
Mathematica is leading this study in collaboration with L’Heureux Lewis-McCoy; Kathy King, an associate principal at Redstone Strategy Group; and Vanja Dukic, a professor of applied mathematics at the University of Colorado-Boulder. The study will leverage data on networks, intermediaries, and continuous improvement practices from the other evaluation teams and link these data to student outcomes from participating districts, including data on student subgroups. The goal is to describe the effect of the NSI grants on student outcomes and to understand the mechanisms and conditions that are related to any impacts of the grants. King and Dukic, in particular, are experts in Bayesian statistics, a state-of-the-art approach for sharpening the interpretation of the study’s early results—based on a smaller sample of schools—to support the foundation’s decision making. The outcome findings will emerge starting in 2022 and will be refined further in subsequent years.

The foundation is committed to sharing what we learn with Networks for School Improvement grantees and the field on an annual basis. We also hope to learn from others engaged in continuous improvement efforts in education, so that together we can build our understanding of how to help schools get better at getting better in order to improve outcomes for Black, Latinx, and low-income students.