MARSHALL CoLab
COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR LASTING CHANGE



From Innovation to Infrastructure

HOW LOCAL INTERMEDIARIES MAKE EQUITABLE IMPROVEMENT SUSTAINABLE AT SCALE

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Executive Summary

WHY INFRASTRUCTURE, AND WHY NOW

Across the United States, educators are working to improve outcomes for students with disabilities—especially those furthest from opportunity, including students who are Black, Latino, or experiencing poverty. Proven instructional practices exist but too often fail to take hold or scale.

The IGNITE Network launched as a network initially convened by Marshall Street to address this gap, aiming to improve student outcomes in contexts where instruction for students with disabilities was often inconsistent, collaboration was uneven, and schools lacked reliable routines for using data to inform practice. The strategy focused on strengthening enabling conditions, instructional reliability, and collaborative routines within schools.

IGNITE was intentionally designed as a capacity-building strategy. From the outset, Marshall positioned itself in a train-the-trainer role, equipping trusted regional intermediaries to lead, coach, and sustain improvement in their own contexts.

In its first year, IGNITE demonstrated that these practices can strengthen instruction, collaboration, and early student outcomes, particularly for students with disabilities, when implemented with care. Across 28 schools in multiple regions serving more than 11,000 students, educators and leaders reported strong belief in the practices, deepening adoption over time, and early equity signals for students with disabilities.

More importantly, Year 1 surfaced a system-level insight with implications beyond IGNITE itself:

Sustainable impact does not scale through programs alone. It scales when trusted local intermediaries are equipped to lead improvement, supported by enabling conditions, collaborative learning structures, and systems designed to keep work moving even amid turnover and change.

IGNITE's design intentionally shifted resources and authority away from a centralized implementation model and toward locally trusted intermediaries with existing relationships and legitimacy. This approach accelerated ownership, strengthened collaboration across schools, and increased the likelihood that improvement efforts would continue during the life of the network and long after formal participation ends.

This white paper synthesizes Year 1 learning to offer guidance for funders and field leaders interested in advancing durable, equitable improvement. It reflects a broader shift in how scale is pursued: from expanding promising practices through centralized delivery to investing in the regional infrastructure that allows improvement to last, spread, and deepen over time.

The Persistent Problem:

A FIELD RICH IN IDEAS, POOR IN INFRASTRUCTURE

The challenge facing schools is not a lack of effective practices. It is a lack of system capacity to support high-quality implementation over time.

Across the field, improvement efforts often rely on one-time professional development, short-term grants, or external expertise that fades when funding ends. These approaches ask schools to change without equipping the systems around them to learn and continuously improve.

The education field is saturated, often oversaturated, with programs, solutions, and professional development offerings. Yet few are designed to deliberately build local capacity in ways that reduce reliance on external support and enable systems to lead continuous improvement independently.

IGNITE was designed to address this gap: not by adding another initiative, but by strengthening the infrastructure that allows improvement to endure.

Year 1

WHAT YEAR 1 LOOKED LIKE ON THE GROUND

During the 2024–2025 school year, IGNITE launched across three distinct communities:

- **Two regionally led communities** supported by trusted local intermediaries:
  - Tennessee SCORE, in partnership with the Diverse Learners Cooperative, supporting schools in the Nashville region
  - New Jersey Children's Foundation, supporting schools in Newark
- **One Founder Community** composed of schools that had participated in Marshall's prior Networked Improvement Community and served as early design and scale partners for the IGNITE network. This community includes schools across Seattle, the Bay Area, New Orleans, and Los Angeles.



IGNITE Leadership at the Fall Leaders Retreat

Across all three communities, Marshall Street partnered with intermediaries, schools, and evaluation partners to co-develop shared goals, clarify roles, and establish the structures needed to support implementation of Research to Impact Practices. These practices, Repeated Reading, Co-Planning, and Routine Data Cycles, were intentionally selected as a small, coherent set of routines. Schools implemented one or more of the practices based on local context and readiness, embedding them into everyday instructional and collaborative work rather than layering them on as new initiatives.

The work launched with an IGNITE Fall Leaders Retreat, which proved to be a critical enabling condition. The retreat convened funders, intermediary leaders, regional coaches, evaluators, and Marshall's IGNITE leaders to establish a shared vision and purpose; train regional partners on priority practices; align participants around common tools, network design, and ways of working; onboard and align additional coaches; and build relationships across regions. Founder Community Executive Sponsors, who had helped test and refine the practices and shape the network design, joined in part to support learning and share insights as new regions were trained in IGNITE's practices and approach.

Following the retreat, regional leaders launched their local IGNITE communities, with Marshall providing ongoing coaching and support to intermediary teams through regular coaching cycles, regional convenings, and site visits across Tennessee, New Jersey, and Founder Community schools. This support intentionally focused on coaching the coaches, equipping intermediary leaders not only to implement the practices, but to train and support others to do so reliably. These visits allowed for observation of practice, collection of implementation evidence, and real-time feedback that informed ongoing revisions to tools and routines.

Importantly, Year 1 unfolded in real-world conditions. All communities experienced leadership and educator turnover. Rather than halting progress, these disruptions revealed the importance of onboarding systems, documentation, and shared routines, reinforcing the central role of infrastructure in sustaining improvement.

What Year 1 Taught Us

IGNITE's first year confirmed that the practices mattered, and clarified that systems mattered even more.

1. LOCAL OWNERSHIP ACCELERATED SUSTAINABILITY.

As the work shifted from direct support toward an intermediary-led model, Marshall Street intentionally moved into a train-the-trainer role, focusing on building the capacity of regional partners to lead implementation themselves. Marshall's role focused on transferring facilitation, coaching, and improvement science capabilities to regional partners, so that expertise lived within regions rather than at the center. Through targeted training, coaching, and shared learning routines, intermediaries developed the skills and confidence to facilitate learning sessions, support schools, and adapt practices to local context.

As a result, ownership expanded and capacity increased as leadership moved closer to the work. Intermediaries were no longer implementing on behalf of schools, but enabling schools and teams to lead their own improvement efforts, strengthening sustainability and reducing reliance on centralized support.

2. COLLABORATION CREATED ECONOMIES OF SCALE.

Collaboration emerged as both a formal design feature and an informal network effect across IGNITE. Regions did not scale by replicating a fixed model. They scaled by sharing routines, tools, and learning cycles that reduced duplication while allowing for variation. Collaboration across schools and regions made learning faster and more durable.

Importantly, much of this collaboration emerged organically. Site leaders consistently sought out opportunities to learn from one another across schools, roles, and regions, because they saw

> **"The network has provided a rich space for educators and leaders to connect, share best practices, and learn from each other's successes and challenges."**
>
> — IGNITE Executive Sponsor

peers as the most credible and trusted sources of insight. Formal convenings created the conditions for this exchange, but informal connections sustained it. Educators were not passive recipients of practices; they were active contributors to collective knowledge, surfacing what worked, adapting it to context, and sharing it back with the network.

3. ENABLING CONDITIONS WERE ESSENTIAL PREREQUISITES, NOT ADD-ONS.

Meaningful implementation occurred only where enabling conditions were in place. Protected collaboration time, leadership engagement, and access to usable data were essential, and naming these conditions clearly mattered. Treating them as optional, assuming they were in place, or deferring them in the name of momentum consistently limited the depth and durability of implementation.

At the same time, Year 1 reinforced that few schools ever begin from a place of perfect stability. Progress depended not on waiting for ideal conditions, but on holding a clear line on what enabling conditions were required while actively working alongside schools to strengthen those conditions over time. In practice, improving enabling conditions was not separate from embedding new practices: it was part of the work itself and required explicit planning and coaching to build and protect over time.

4. SYSTEMS MUST ANTICIPATE CHANGE.

Turnover and shifting priorities were not anomalies; they were the norm and an increasingly significant challenge in the current education landscape. One clear lesson was the importance of team-based ownership. Schools that invested in committed teams, rather than relying on a single champion, were better able to withstand leadership and staffing changes and maintain momentum. In contrast, schools where the work was concentrated in one role or individual experienced greater disruption when turnover occurred.

At the same time, this pattern underscored the role of systems in sustaining improvement. Schools and regions that proactively planned for onboarding, documentation, and continuity were better able to maintain progress through change. Taken together, this made clear that infrastructure mattered most when conditions were hardest: when teams changed, leaders turned over, and consistency depended on systems rather than individuals.

5. ITERATION STRENGTHENED THE MODEL.

Year 1 surfaced misconceptions about the practices, uneven readiness across partners, and practical barriers to implementation that were not fully visible at launch. This was an intentional tradeoff of the intermediary-led approach: less centralized control created greater variation in how practices were interpreted and enacted across contexts.

Being closer to the work made that variation useful rather than problematic. Because intermediaries and coaches were embedded in local contexts, iteration could be grounded in specific students, teams, and conditions. Continuous improvement focused not simply on what worked, but on what worked, for whom, and in what context, allowing practices to align over time through collaboration and refinement without flattening local adaptation.

The Infrastructure That Makes Improvement Doable

In this paper, infrastructure does not refer to programs, platforms, or one-time supports. It refers to the roles, routines, skills, tools, and shared ways of working that enable educators and systems to implement practices consistently, learn from evidence, adapt to context, and sustain improvement over time, especially amid turnover and change. Marshall's role in Year 1 was to design and model this infrastructure, then build the capacity of regional intermediaries to own and strengthen it over time.

Year 1 clarified that sustainable improvement requires intentional infrastructure. IGNITE organizes this infrastructure around three interconnected pillars.



IGNITE Nashville Learning Consolidation Collaboration

SYSTEMS

Structures and routines that support learning over time, including protected time for shared planning and reflection, regular regional learning cycles with built-in consolidation and action planning, and clear decision-making processes that turn insight into next steps.

SKILLS

The people and capabilities that multiply impact, including coaching and facilitation skills, leadership development and thought partnership, and peer learning across roles and sites.

TOOLS

Usable resources that support consistent practice, including implementation guides and templates, observation and reflection protocols, and data displays designed to inform learning.

These pillars are interdependent.

Tools without skills create compliance. Skills without systems lead to burnout. Systems without ownership do not last.

Evidence of Progress

SIGNALS AFTER ONE YEAR

The evidence below should be read as early, directional signals rather than causal proof: indicators of momentum that help illuminate how belief, adoption, and outcomes begin to shift when enabling conditions and regional infrastructure are in place.

IGNITE's Year 1 evidence points to meaningful progress across belief, adoption, and early outcomes, particularly where regional infrastructure was strong.

GROWING BELIEF IN THE PRACTICES

Belief in both the value and impact of the Research to Impact Practices was strong across IGNITE communities.

100%

of educators and school leaders reported that the practices improved student outcomes.

100%

of school leaders reported that the practices were valuable for students with disabilities and beneficial for all students.

85%

of educators reported a positive impact on student learning in their own classrooms.

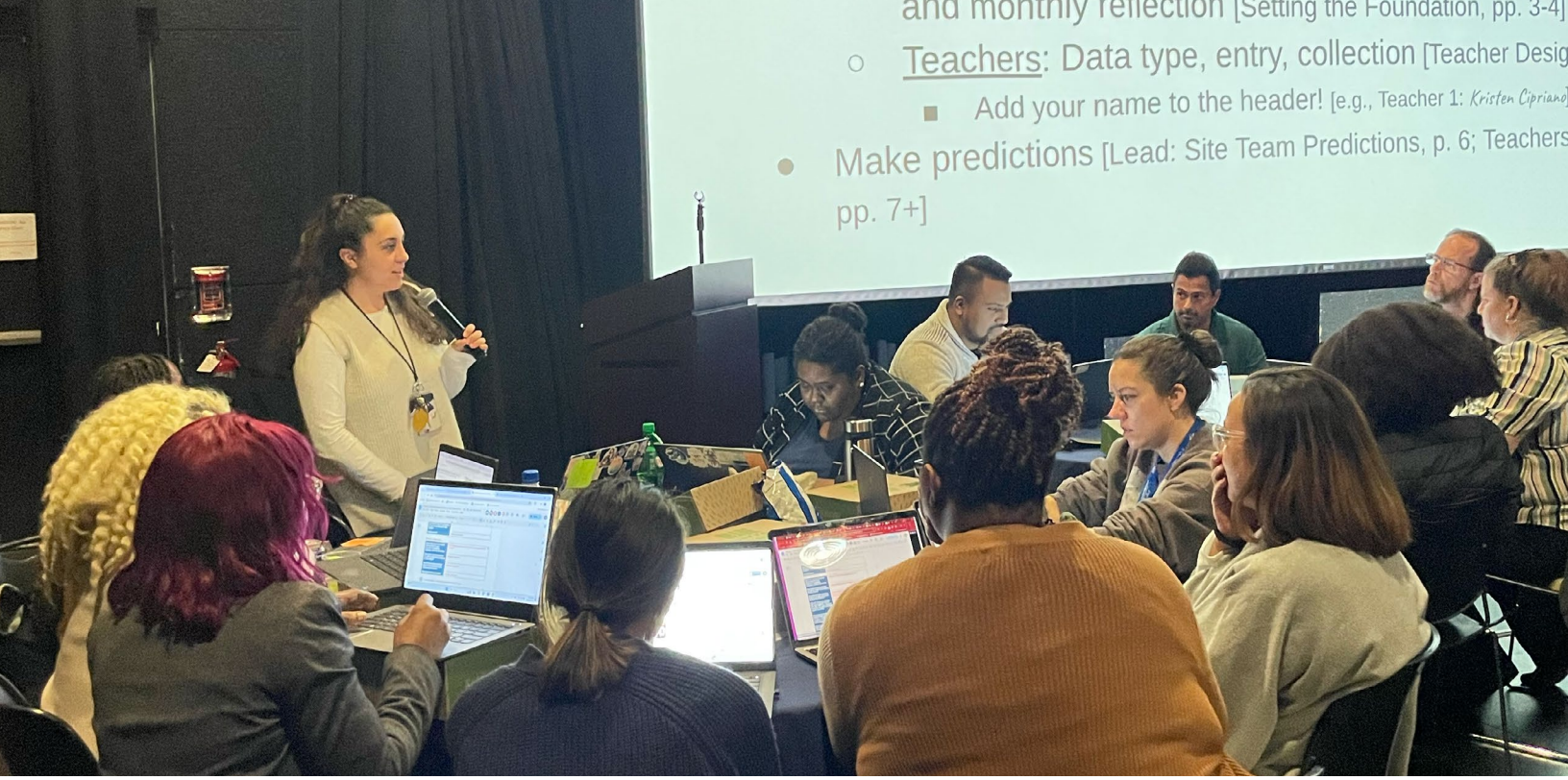
95%

of educators reported that IGNITE contributed to a shared win or positive student impact, with half indicating that it significantly contributed.

Educators described improved instructional alignment, stronger collaboration, and more inclusive classrooms, suggesting that the practices were not only valued in theory, but experienced as meaningful in daily work.

DEEPENING ADOPTION AND SUSTAINABILITY

- IGNITE launched with 28 schools across three communities, spanning regions including Nashville, Seattle, the Bay Area, New Orleans, Newark, and Los Angeles.
- Despite turnover, 90% of schools are continuing into Year 2, and the network will expand to 32 schools.
- Adoption deepened within schools, nearly doubling participation from 102 educators and teams at launch to 201 entering Year 2, expanding these practices across additional classrooms and grade levels.
- The network achieved a net promoter score (NPS) of 57, a common measure of how likely participants are to recommend an experience to others. Scores above 50 are typically considered exceptional, suggesting strong perceived value and early evidence that the regional, intermediary-led model resonated with schools and educators.



REGIONAL OWNERSHIP IN ACTION

By the end of Year 1, intermediaries independently facilitated learning sessions, adapted tools, and supported implementation. Resources were refined to strengthen onboarding and continuity in response to turnover.

- These shifts were reflected in leader and educator experience:
- 97% of school leaders reported that IGNITE strengthened their capacity to lead improvement efforts.
- 86% of educators reported that participation positively influenced their professional growth and long-term commitment to the field.

EARLY EQUITY SIGNALS

- At Collegiate Baton Rouge, where Repeated Reading was implemented consistently across the entire school, 34% of students participating in Repeated Reading demonstrated more than two years of reading growth by mid-year.
- In both the Nashville region and the Founder community, schools implementing co-planning saw course passage rates increase for all students over the year.
- In the Founder community, where practices have been in place longer and implemented more broadly, the gap in passing rates between students with and without IEPs narrowed substantially, in some cases nearly closing.

These findings are early, not final. A more formal Measurement and Evaluation analysis with Mathematica is underway in Year 2.

Taken together, these early results suggest that sustained, schoolwide implementation, supported by strong enabling conditions, may be a key driver of durable equity gains.

What We Embedded

MOVING INTO YEAR 2

Year 1 learning directly shaped Year 2 design. In an effort to continuously improve and strengthen impact at scale, IGNITE drew on multiple forms of evidence to refine its model—strengthening enabling conditions and focusing support where it matters most, so that improvements benefit all students while accelerating progress for those historically underserved at the intersection of race, class, and disability.

What to Repeat, Refine, and Reinforce

Theme	What Worked	What to Adjust	Year 2 Focus
Leadership	Regular data reviews and senior leadership engagement (CAOs, executive directors, principals) strengthened alignment across systems.	Strengthen how leaders establish and maintain enabling conditions (protected time, data access, shared priorities).	Build leadership onboarding and alignment routines around enabling conditions.
Coaching Quality	Regional coaches thrived with clear routines and shared agendas.	Design for variation in readiness across regions.	Tiered coaching that provides personalized support by need/ experience level.
Tools & Resources	Streamlined templates increased usability and consistency.	Centralize documentation and resources to minimize overload and reference them routinely.	Simplify and personalize tools to reduce burden.
Data Use	Implementation data routines improved confidence and practice reflection.	Visualizations and trend analysis need to be simpler and faster.	Integrate automated dashboards and real-time reflection prompts.
Regional Learning	Hub structures created ownership and shared accountability.	Staff transitions challenged consistency.	Strengthen onboarding and handoff routines across years.

In response, IGNITE focused Year 2 on strengthening the infrastructure most predictive of durable impact: refining tools, deepening senior leadership ownership of enabling conditions, providing proactive coaching on implementation planning, and building structured onboarding resources to sustain progress through turnover. Critically, Year 2 also reflects a continued **gradual release of responsibility**: regional intermediaries are taking on increasing ownership of the systems and structures that Marshall Street initially led, including facilitation of learning cycles, onboarding of new schools and staff, and coordination of cross-site learning. This intentional handoff is designed to ensure that improvement capacity is embedded locally and sustained beyond direct central involvement.

The Shift:

FROM SCALING PRACTICES TO BUILDING SYSTEMS

Year 1 clarified that two risks must be addressed in parallel: continuing to rigorously examine whether and how the practices improve student outcomes, and ensuring that the field does not default to short-term initiatives rather than investing in the infrastructure required to sustain improvement over time.

IGNITE is now intentionally focused on building regional capacity: the roles, routines, and systems that allow improvement to continue without dependency on external providers.

Sustainable systems are built when organizations invest in strengthening their own capacity to learn, adapt, and improve, and when external support is designed to transfer ownership, not sustain dependency.

Early Implications for Funders

INVESTING IN WHAT LASTS

IGNITE's first year offers a set of broader implications for funders seeking to support durable, equitable improvement. These implications can be understood as a small set of interrelated decision lenses that may guide future investment.

1. INVEST IN TRUSTED LOCAL INTERMEDIARIES.

Organizations embedded in local contexts are positioned to translate evidence into practice, build relational trust, and sustain improvement over time. Where ownership moved closer to the work, belief, adoption, and continuity strengthened. Sustainable scale requires more than engaging intermediaries as partners; it requires resourcing them to serve as improvement leaders in their regions, developing facilitation and coaching expertise, building train-the-trainer capacity, and gradually assuming responsibility for externally launched systems, cultivating internal expertise that compounds over time.

2. TREAT ENABLING CONDITIONS AS CORE INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT ANCILLARY COSTS.

Protected time, leadership engagement, and usable data infrastructure function as prerequisites for impact. Investments that overlook these conditions are more likely to produce short-lived gains, even when underlying practices are well designed.

3. FUND COLLABORATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT JUST INDIVIDUAL SITES OR PROGRAMS.

Shared routines, learning cycles, and tools reduced duplication and allowed variation to become a source of learning rather than fragmentation. In this way, collaboration operated as a mechanism for scale, not an add-on.

4. PRIORITIZE SYSTEMS DESIGNED TO ANTICIPATE AND WITHSTAND CHANGE.

Turnover and shifting priorities are structural features of today's education systems. Investments that strengthen staff onboarding, documented and institutionalized routines, and regional learning structures are more likely to yield returns that compound rather than reset, so improvement does not depend on individual champions, but is embedded in the system itself.

The early signals described above suggest not only potential outcome improvement, but increased consistency of access for students in systems historically prone to instructional disruption. Taken together, these lenses suggest that durable impact is less about identifying the single strongest intervention and more about investing in the conditions that allow improvement to continue as people, priorities, and contexts change. Funders seeking long-term returns should look for efforts that build local ownership, enable collaboration, and embed learning into the systems that surround schools.

IGNITE NETWORK

MARSHALL CoLab

Marshall CoLab is dedicated to improving teaching and learning for students furthest from opportunity. We bring together communities of educators, instructional coaches, and experts to co-develop and implement evidence-based practices and make them available to all schools. Using the tools of continuous improvement — the science of getting better at getting better — we support educators along the path from theory to transformation to achieve lasting change. Our IGNITE Network is a coalition of schools committed to making dramatic gains in the experiences, environments, and outcomes for students at the intersection of race, class, and ability. Over two years, these schools will implement and refine practices that lead to positive outcomes for students with disabilities.

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