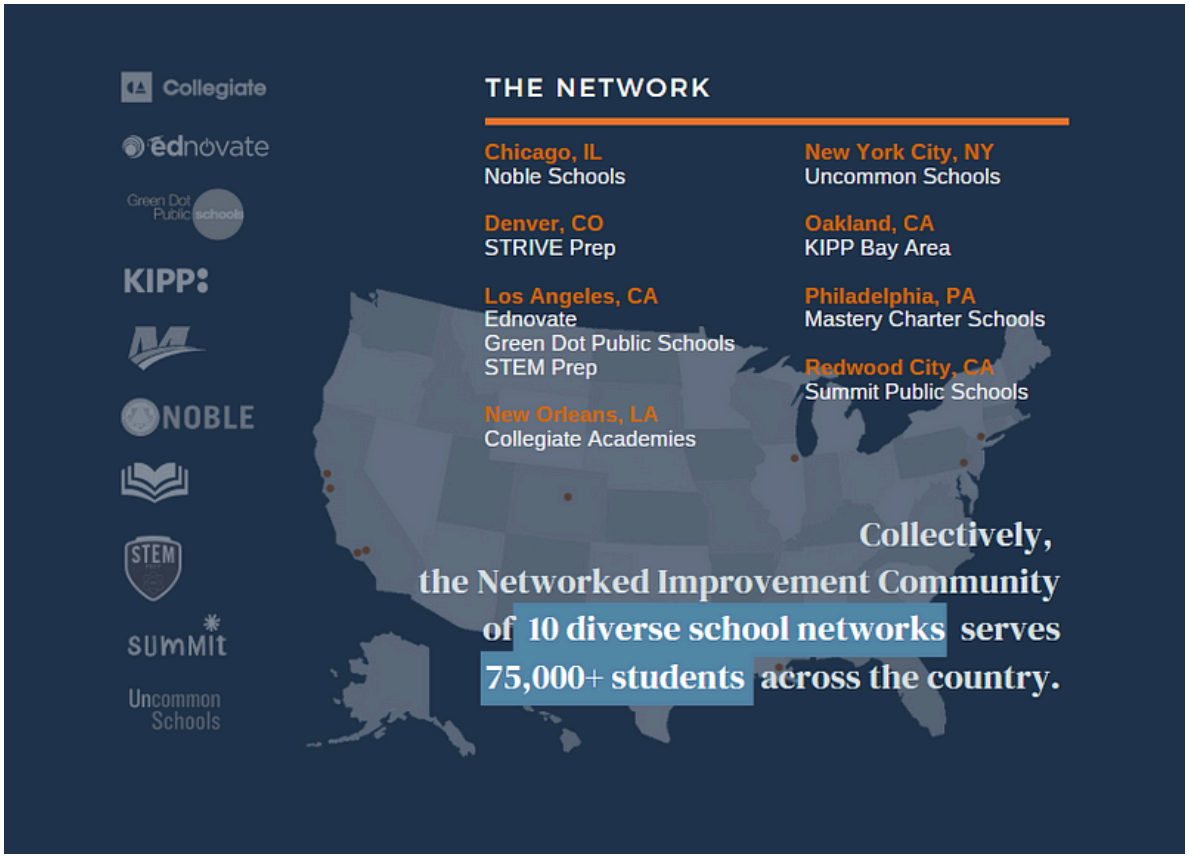
NETWORKED IMPROVEMENT COMMUNITY

Leading Change that Lasts: Collaborating to Center Underserved Students

Stephanie Lassalle, Marshall Street
Vanessa Murrieta, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

One of the biggest challenges in education is making change stick. Innovative projects fizzle once funding ends. Promising pilots get watered down as they expand to more classrooms. New priorities divert our focus from successful interventions. This cycle is costly for schools — in terms of time, people, and resources — and leads to "initiative fatigue" that cements doubt about whether our system will ever change. Students and families, particularly those with the greatest needs, pay the price.

We believe there is an alternative. In fact, we've seen it. More than a year after the Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities (NIC) concluded, at least 80% of partner schools are continuing and sustaining their efforts. Funded by the Gates Foundation, the NIC provides a powerful contrast to what typically happens when a grant ends. The story behind this initiative offers several lessons for educators and funders, including the importance of investing in community, committing to authentic partnership, focusing on students traditionally marginalized, and taking a deliberate approach to sustainability planning. While the structure of the NIC was unique, we believe these lessons offer a roadmap for those interested in sustaining transformational change in our schools.



Invest in community

The education field is full of sobering statistics that describe the structural inequities faced by students receiving special education services. Students with disabilities score lower on standardized assessments, are more likely to be disciplined, and are less likely to graduate high school. These trends are more pronounced for students of color with disabilities.

No individual school can solve these complex challenges alone. That's why the NIC brought together a deep bench of practitioners, content experts, technical assistance providers, and grant leaders with broad expertise united around an ambitious aim: to dramatically improve outcomes, experiences, and environments for Black and Latino students with disabilities experiencing poverty by June 2023.

Leading change efforts in a large community with a diverse array of perspectives took diligence. We had to align on purpose, as well as build the trust and relationships critical to the success of a networked improvement community.

To align on purpose, we dug into the data. Examining data from the 10 participating school districts immediately reinforced a shared vision amongst the networked improvement community and solidified a collective understanding that, while the contexts varied across

schools and regions, the challenges schools faced were similar. Bringing teams together to review data and identify trends deepened connections across the community and catalyzed efforts to improve.

To build strong relationships, we designed virtual collaboration events, in-person learning tours, and network-wide in-person convenings. All of these events intentionally created connections and capacity across our community to learn with and from one another, celebrate wins and progress together, and problem solve barriers with the collective knowledge and expertise of the community. One participant summed up their growth as an improver during our final NIC convening: "Sometimes you did the right thing the wrong way. That's okay. Try again." By investing in our community, we ensured we created a web of relationships that ensured no one faced this work alone.



Program Officer Vanessa Murrieta welcomes the Networked Improvement Community at the Fall 2022 Convening.

Our work demonstrated that community isn't a buzzword. It's a practice sparked by a shared vision and reinforced through routines and structures that deepen relationships over time. Community doesn't happen overnight and it takes significant resources, but like all sound investments, it pays steady dividends through greater engagement.

Commit to authentic partnership

The Gates Foundation and Marshall Street jointly led this effort through an unusual funder-grantee relationship. Instead of stepping back once the grant was made, the foundation was deeply involved in developing strategy, reviewing progress, and workshopping solutions to problems as they arose. We worked together as an integrated team, sharing decision making and accountability for the success of the project. We also modeled the values and approach we hoped to see by collaboratively planning events and strategizing together on changes to our network design. It wasn't always easy, but this approach ensured that we remained aligned, even during challenging times.

Almost immediately, our carefully crafted plans were upended. In March 2020, just a few months after the NIC launched, the COVID-19 pandemic closed school buildings across the country. Instead of developing an improvement plan for the following school year, the community addressed the immediate needs of students in the target population, many of whom were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Marshall Street and the foundation saw the need for resources to support remote learning. Our close working relationship allowed us to shift priorities and led to the development of a series of COVID-19 rapid response resources for schools in the network and those across the country looking for guidance during an incredibly challenging time.

Although the pandemic delayed the start of the continuous improvement work, our decision to temporarily pivot was the right call. We recognized that our top priority had to be working to meet our partners where they were, and that a spirit of flexibility would be essential to our collective success.

In addition to a flexible mindset, we worked to stay aligned as a leadership team and with the schools participating in the NIC. For Gates and Marshall Street, that meant semi-annual deep dives to review data, take stock of our progress, and adjust our strategy as needed. For our partners, we initiated alignment meetings before the start of the academic year with each school team. These meetings allowed us to develop a shared vision for the work ahead with clear expectations for both the school and us. Educators identified what they needed to make meaningful progress for students, and we worked together to develop a plan for coaching and technical assistance to proactively address them.

This approach strengthened the improvement community because schools felt greater ownership over their work, yet it also meant we had to be willing to take some risks. For example, at the start of the project, we expected that each of the 10 school networks would identify one improvement project to be implemented in two initial focal schools. Instead, several partners identified different needs. In the case of Philadelphia-based Mastery Schools, the team proposed flipping the plan by launching two distinct improvement efforts at one focal campus. We believed this was a massive undertaking for educators and added complexity for

our networked effort, yet we trusted that our school partners knew what would work best for their community. Centering our partners in our efforts to lead this work, we worked with the team to devise a plan to make it work. The resulting project led to a new focus area on best practices for supporting students with emotional and behavioral disabilities — and was more successful than if we had insisted that Mastery follow our original model.

Embracing authentic partnership means being willing to adjust expectations and co-create solutions. However, as long as we and our partners stayed aligned to our ultimate goal of improved outcomes for students, we knew we were on the right track.

Embrace targeted universalism

Targeted universalism is an equity-driven approach that centers resources and intervention design around the unique needs and experiences of a specific group within a system, with the belief that everyone will benefit from those efforts. For the NIC, targeted universalism meant focusing on students at the intersection of race, class, and ability — recognizing that changing practices to address systemic barriers for our focus group of students would create a ripple effect that enhances outcomes for all students.



Network Leaders Stephanie Lassalle (far left) and Vanessa Murrieta (far right) with community members from Mastery Schools, Marshall Street and the Gates Foundation on a school learning tour in New York.

While targeted universalism wasn't the leading priority during the development of this grant, it emerged as a guiding principle early on because of the way it aligned with the NIC's vision for systems change. Throughout the project, we saw how centering the needs and experiences of historically underserved students could make an impact on outcomes for other students.

For example, educators at STEM Preparatory Schools developed a new gradebook tool that allowed teachers to frequently monitor student progress toward learning goals throughout the semester and provide personalized interventions to support students in the moment, rather than all at once at the end of a term. Rapid intervention is especially important for students with disabilities who may need additional individualized support.

Educators at Crown Prep Academy implemented the new tool in classrooms with both special education and general education students, examining data monthly. Among the 30 students with disabilities served, the percentage of A and B grades increased from 25%, when continuous improvement efforts began, to 81% in the fall of 2022. However, Crown Prep also saw improvement in the experience of general education students. Among students at Crown Prep who do not have disabilities, A and B grades improved from 49% to 77%.

Whether schools are tackling academic interventions or school culture, a targeted universalism approach can help create the conditions for systems change. As school leaders see improvement in outcomes among the targeted student population, they can feel more confident expanding the intervention and training other educators. This, in turn, can highlight other disparities for schools to address. For the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the NIC's focus on targeted universalism highlighted a powerful lever for change and is informing future grantmaking.

Plan for the future

From the beginning of this networked endeavor, we knew that sustainability had to be central to the work, rather than an afterthought. Our partners were fully committed to the vision of making dramatic gains in the learning environments, experiences, and outcomes of Black and Latino students with disabilities experiencing poverty. They knew that to take the promising practices they developed to scale across their school networks would require engagement and buy-in from their school communities. Leveraging the strong relationships forged, we designed a convening that grounded each school team in their improvement journey to date to construct a vision for this work to live on to and through 2025..

To achieve lasting, systems-level change, organizations must integrate these interventions into the core of their mission — not as an additional priority, but as the foundation of their work. School teams engaged network leaders, school administrators, coaches, and teacher leaders from both special and general education right from the outset. Together, they collaboratively set priorities and refined action plans to anticipate and overcome potential barriers to

implementation. By working through the details and building a strong case for sustained commitment, they positioned the changes to continue well beyond the end of the grant period.

Just as important for long-term sustainability, educators started small. Instead of jumping to implement a solution, schools conducted small-scale tests of their ideas. Through successive Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles, they iterated on their approaches, incorporating feedback from teachers along the way.



Photo credit: Collegiate Academies Walter L. Cohen High School

This process took time, yet we knew it was essential to demonstrate readiness for change and evidence of success before moving to scale. Only once they had tested and refined their idea, built evidence of impact with students in their schools, and cultivated classroom champions did school teams begin implementing the practice more broadly.

The approach paid off. As one participant said, “Once we were able to prove that the practices worked, we were able to build it into the high school goals and curriculums.”

Final thoughts

The Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities was guided by the African proverb: If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. Over more than three years, we worked diligently to live our values and go far together. Even though the grant concluded in June 2023, the vast majority of partner schools are continuing to implement and scale the interventions they developed because they built a solid foundation for change. As another participant said at a recent virtual reunion, "We got to do some of the deepest learning during some of the hardest years. Now nothing feels difficult in comparison."

Unfortunately, the hard truth is that most schools do not have a strategy to close equity gaps between students with disabilities and their peers. As funders and leaders of this work, we hope our experience shows that dramatic improvement for students furthest from opportunity is possible. When we invest in community, create authentic partnerships, plan for the future, and embrace targeted universalism, we can create the conditions for lasting change.