Surviving to Thriving:
Funder Collaboratives that Matter

written by Kelly James, Education First

Introduction

Funders who focus on improving education outcomes do so because they recognize the essential contribution public schools play in creating a more just and inclusive society, a competitive workforce and a functioning democracy. Although some students excel in U.S. schools, too many others experience an ossified, inequitable system that fails to provide the opportunities, resources and options they need for success. And most often, the students not well-served are those from families and communities with fewer resources, those with learning or language differences, and/or those who identify as Black, Indigenous or people of color.

However, philanthropic efforts to catalyze innovations in education and advance racial equity have met with mixed success. It turns out that changing a system designed a century ago, with archaic rules and rife with politics, is hard work!

To better match the magnitude of the challenge, some education funders have achieved more exponential impact by pooling resources, sharing insights and leveraging the collective power and influence of the group. They join together as a funder collaborative—a cooperative structure that, according to one definition, leverages "expertise, relationships, and money together in a way that will produce results for society beyond the reach and capacity of any single donor."[1] While funder collaboratives hold the promise of achieving greater impact compared to working alone, working together across different organizations requires effort, and collaboratives must be thoughtfully constructed and managed.

To help more funders work together successfully, Education First produced this unique guide. Unlike other resources, it draws on more than 15 years of direct experience designing, leading and studying funder collaboratives. We have facilitated more than 15 education-specific collaboratives and engaged more than 90 foundations to bring new attention, resources and solutions to challenges as diverse as bilingual education, implementation of learning standards, high-quality assessment, educator development and postsecondary access. _Learn more about some collaboratives facilitated by Education First here_.

When well organized and facilitated, funder collaboratives have the potential to deepen relationships, advance collective knowledge, activate more resources and accomplish more than when funders act alone. This guide aims to help funders harness this power.

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About funder collaboratives

Over time, researchers, consultants and fellow funders have contributed to a robust set of literature that can inform new or re-forming funder collaboratives. The research to date has focused on three areas:

1. Reasons funders participate in funder collaboratives

2. Different types or forms of collaboration

3. Traits common to effective collaboratives

Why do funders participate in collaboratives?

Generally, three primary circumstances draw funders together and help them decide working collectively can be more effective than working individually.

Expand possibilities
Funder collaboratives allow participants to pool funding, share expertise and expand networks—multiplying the resources available to tackle thorny problems, invest in innovative solutions and take advantage of new opportunities.

Share risk
Funders may feel more comfortable working on especially challenging problems when they know they are not acting alone, they have more resources available, and their work is supported by robust structures for learning and continuous improvement. This quality is especially helpful when working in highly politicized environments or at times when the solutions needed are not already known and must be adaptive.

Create larger-scale change
More resources and risk-taking can in turn increase the likelihood of success and impact. Having more resources facilitates the development of shared knowledge and stronger theories of change as well as effective practices and system changes. Collaboratives can further improve their likelihood of success by establishing strong feedback loops that help the group understand the progress and make course corrections as needed.

Learn more:

See our curated collection of recommended resources featuring research on effective funder collaboratives.

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What are different types of funder collaboratives?

As always, form should follow function. Research suggests four common types of collaboratives that exist on a continuum of coordination and engagement, depending on the shared goal and challenges funders expect to tackle together:[2]

1. **Learning networks** where funders build knowledge of particular issues to support their individual grantmaking efforts;

2. **Co-investment or investment alignment** collaboratives where funders direct investments to jointly identified grantees;

3. **Pooled funds** where funder investments are pooled together for collective grantmaking; and

4. **Co-creation of a new organization** to fill a jointly identified gap or need in the field.

Importantly, funder collaboratives—and their forms—are not static. The most successful ones are dynamic partnerships that adapt to changing conditions, goals and needs of those involved. For example, a collaborative may start as an informal learning network but then evolve to facilitate co-investment or shared funding of a new organization, as participating funders come to understand problems and opportunities more clearly.

To determine which collaborative form may be best, given the variety of issues and organizations potentially involved, Education First encourages funders to use a decision-making matrix to (1) **define the problem** they are working to address, (2) decide whether to pursue an adaptable or targeted **timeline and strategy** and (3) agree on whether their **scope of action** should be broad or narrow.

What are traits of effective funder collaboratives?

Funder collaboratives are highly relational endeavors, and research shows their success hinges on participating funders' ability to articulate a shared vision, find common ground, compromise, make decisions efficiently and work well together.

For example, a 2018 literature review found that key success factors for funder collaboratives include "strong relationships; aligned beliefs, goals and strategies; mutually agreed-upon governance structures; and continual measurement and reevaluation." Or, as a GrantCraft guide described these efforts in 2009, "Collaboratives aren't mindless, faceless structures… they're fundamentally rooted in human relationships among people who see the possibility of greater impact by working together."

How are relationships cultivated and how do different collaboratives navigate the different needs of different funders? Education First's experience supporting collaboratives suggests these factors are essential: A shared sense of urgency; trust, mutual respect and sensitivity to each funder's internal culture; and willingness to learn and revisit priorities when the landscape evolves.

Assess & Reflect

Maintain

Launch

Form/Re-form

Sunset
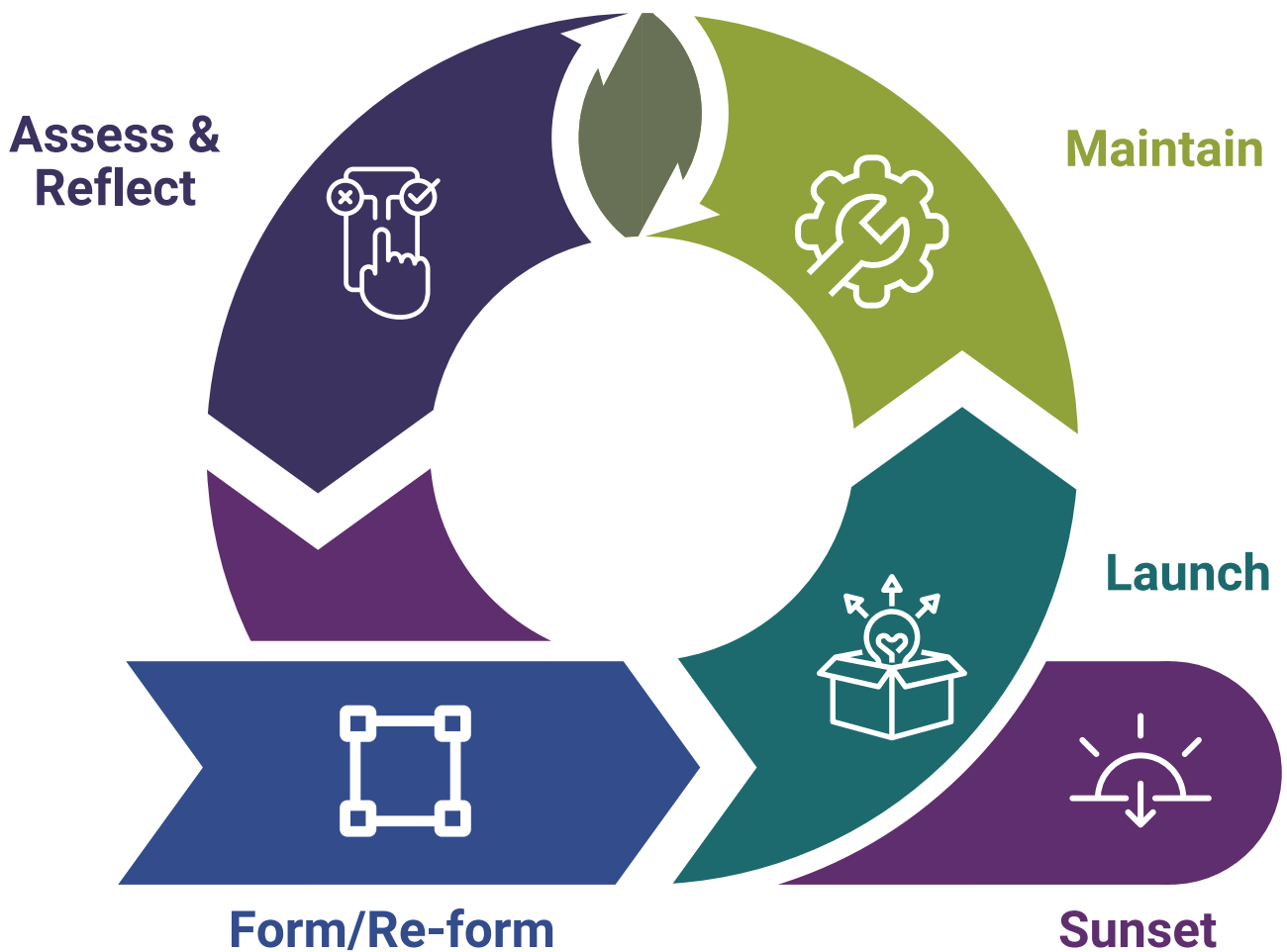
The funder collaborative life cycle

Regardless of their goals for working together, funders looking to form (or re-form) a funder collaborative will be most successful when they share a clear sense of what to anticipate and how to navigate inevitable successes and setbacks. From Education First's experience, we see five common phases—or parts of a life cycle—that collaboratives typically move through.[3] Recommended key questions to ask and key actions to take at each of these phases are described below.
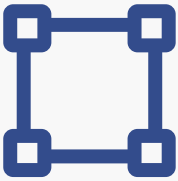
Form the collaborative

In this initial phase, collaborative members work together to define shared goals and develop a structure that supports effective participation and collaboration. This step should happen regardless of whether funders are working proactively and carefully to support a large shift in the field (e.g., implementation of Common Core State Standards) or find themselves responding to sudden, unanticipated needs (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns).

There are many important questions to consider during this first phase and it is important to have a plan; at the same time, our experience suggests overplanning becomes a real risk when expectations for perfect detail in strategy and operations stall momentum and lead to paralysis. For example, when exploring the possibility of tackling issues including transfer, affordability and enrollment among others, rather than fall into a trap of overplanning, members of the California Postsecondary Funder Collaborative instead chose to move to the launch phase even though its collaboration agenda was not entirely clear. The group explicitly decided to use the first year of work together as the venue for establishing a short-list of shared priority areas to guide the group in future years.

Education First recommends prioritizing these activities during this phase:

- Define the shared problem the collaborative is working to address along with clear goals and parameters.

- Confirm collaborative participants.

- Determine what collaborative type/form will best advance participants' goals (see What are different types of funder collaboratives?) and which key decisions must be addressed early on. For example, if forming a learning network, funders will need a learning agenda; if forming an investment-aligned collaborative or pooled fund, funders will need a theory of action.

- Commit to develop the "nuts and bolts" to guide collaborative operations, including governance and decision-making protocols, membership expectations and a plan for onboarding new members.

- Establish a clear, shared idea about the definition of success and how the group will assess progress.

Launch the collaborative

Once collaborative members have established shared goals, a clear scope of work and parameters for their partnership, they are ready to launch. At this point, the focus naturally shifts from planning to doing. But take note: this transition requires great care. Because the group has not yet produced any outputs, it is vulnerable to disengagement and collapse at this early stage. For new collaboratives to take root and thrive, they need to demonstrate their value quickly.

For example, after a brief formation phase that raised $1 million, the Innovations in Assessment and New Measures collaborative moved briskly. It invited proposals and made sub-grants to support a variety of state and district efforts that explored alternative approaches to measuring student success. Seeing high demand in the field in response to these opportunities, participating funders then committed to an additional round of $5 million (and attracted another funder partner). By moving quickly to respond to energy and interest in the field, this group was able to make an immediate impact. Indeed, over four years, these funders have co-invested more than $15 million to help test alternative, innovative approaches to state summative assessments and use of non-academic measures and indicators in accountability systems.

Common launch phase activities include:

- Explain the formation and goals of the collaborative to key stakeholders and partners.

- Facilitate early meetings to strengthen relationships and increase members' understanding of the collaborative's goals and operations.

- Ensure initial actions clearly align with the collaborative's objectives and agreements.

- Address questions related to goals, scope and parameters as they arise and refine the "nuts and bolts" of operations based on early experiences.

Maintain the collaborative

Funder collaboratives are not a "set and forget" operation. Once a collaborative has launched and begun to demonstrate its value, its members move into a new phase during which they must actively maintain the momentum of their work and the health of their organization to ensure the collaborative takes root and thrives.[4]

One common challenge during this more mature phase of the partnership is adjusting to changing field conditions. For example, in spring 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and as the disruptions to education systems became clearer, members of the California Education Funder Collaborative (CEFC) debated the future of their network. Should the group disband so individual funders could focus on supporting their current grantees, some members asked? Or, others proposed, should the group collectively pivot and refocus on supporting COVID-19 relief efforts?

During this period of uncertainty, members looked to their founding documents and original goals: transparency, information sharing, collaborative learning, and co-investment in areas where funder interests converged. In the end, rather than spurring funders to abandon their collaboration, the COVID-19 pandemic drew the group's members closer together. Choosing to maintain their original purpose, CEFC evolved during the pandemic to become a stable place for funders to share, learn and adapt together during the uncertainty and churn of the pandemic, improving their collective ability to respond to changing needs in the field.

During this phase, Education First suggests prioritizing these activities:

- Reconfirm meeting cadences and decision-making structures to ensure members make progress toward their collective goals and feel their participation is adding value.

- Invite and onboard new members and offboard legacy members based on evolving needs.

- Commit to continuous improvement activities and progress assessments that help ensure the collaborative is meeting participant needs and accomplishing its goals.
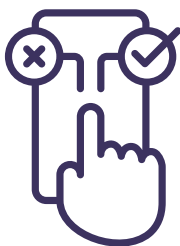
Assess and reflect

During the assessment stage, Education First recommends participating collaborative members:

- Gather relevant data about their activities together.

- Assess progress to understand if the collaborative is meeting member needs and achieving its intended goals.

- Surface lessons learned.

- Celebrate collaborative successes and recognize unique member contributions.

- Decide if the collaborative should maintain current operations, re-form or sunset.

Education First has found that funder collaboratives tend to flourish when they commit to frequent assessments of progress and then identify needed course corrections. Healthy collaboratives regularly address two questions: (1) Are members satisfied with the collaborative? and (2) Is the collaborative accomplishing its goals?

A common challenge during this phase is accessing the right information that helps the group understand if it is making progress; developing an assessment plan earlier in the partnership—such as during the formation phase—can help. As our colleagues note in their related article, clarifying what success looks like can happen even when the group's strategy is unclear: "Funders don't always need a defined solution at the front end; many social problems are complex and require adaptive approaches. But even in the absence of a clear strategy, collaborations need clear goals, clarity about the problem the collaboration is attempting to tackle, and *some way of knowing whether progress is being made* (emphasis added)."[5]

Planning for the assessment phase might include a relatively light touch approach such as asking all grantees to report on a shared set of outcomes, or something more intensive such as commissioning a third-party evaluation. As another approach, some collaboratives have asked Education First to conduct confidential, one-on-one feedback conversations with each member.

Just as important as assembling information that can help assess progress is the prioritization of time and space for "meaning making"—facilitated reflection on what that information means for the work of the collaborative.[6] Collaboratives that can effectively gather and process information about their progress will be more likely to accomplish their goals than those who do not.

Sunset the collaborative

Every collaborative should plan on a "moment of truth" (or several, if the collaborative intends to exist for an extended duration) where members either intentionally re-form or thoughtfully sunset the effort.

Sunsetting a funder collaborative is an important activity that marks the culmination of the structure—and reflects the conclusion that the group has either accomplished what it set out to do, or is unlikely to accomplish more than it already has.

If the group determines that its work is not yet done and there is sufficient interest in maintaining some form of collaboration, members can instead re-form with redefined goals, structures, parameters and agreements that can effectively serve the collaborative in its next cycle. As part of implementing a decision to "re-form," funders should:

- Revisit and revise the collaborative's goals, scope and parameters as well as the "nuts and bolts" guiding collaborative operations, based on what has been accomplished and how the field has shifted.

- Consider group composition and onboard/offboard members as needed.

- Re-establish a clear idea of what success looks like and how the group will assess progress.

- Re-establish shared commitments/community agreements for how members will collaborate.

Education First recommends collaborative members undertake these activities in this phase:

- Explicitly make a decision about the collaborative's future, based on the assessment during Assess & Reflect Phase.

- Communicate the decision to sunset or re-form with a different approach or goals to current/previous grantees of the collaborative (if the collaborative has engaged in grantmaking).

- Document and share details of the funder collaborative's progress with the field, including key outcomes and lessons learned for those who might follow.

- Identify opportunities for members to engage in other vehicles that can support collaboration across different funders.

If the collaborative decides to commit to another cycle of work together, they should consider if their current approach to staffing the collaborative is still the right one. The Emerging Bilingual Collaborative (EBC) came to this crossroad in 2021. After three years of successful collaboration, the group wanted to continue, but felt that it was time to hire support staff because EBC's grant portfolio demanded a full-time staffing model. Education First worked with funders to support a transition to a full-time director, while we moved into serving in an advisory role to both the funders and director.

The Courage to sunset

From 2017–2019, Education First facilitated the Funders' Collaborative for Innovative Measurement (FCIM). The group started its work together with a set of co-funded anchor investments and operated as a learning network. As time went on, some members wanted to continue aligned investments and/or pooled funding. However, the group was unable to develop consensus on the parameters for the problem to solve, in part due to divergent individual funder strategies, goals and appetite for investment. Through facilitated dialogue, the collaborative decided to sunset operation as a stand-alone collaborative and merge with another learning network focused on related issues.

The FCIM example demonstrates how—even with diligent upfront planning and frequent dialogue around group identity—collaboratives need to have the courage to sunset when they are not working as intended.

Collaboration is hard work and, as [former Hewlett Foundation President Paul Brest mused](#), it "has inevitable up-front costs in the time and effort spent in communicating and making decisions together with one's partners. The process can often be frustrating, and a beneficial outcome is hardly assured. At the end of the day, the extra effort is justified only if it has greater impact in improving people's lives."

Education First knows firsthand that making the decision to sunset is not easy (see sidebar). Funder collaboratives working to make this determination can benefit by looking beyond their membership to seek advice from trusted external stakeholders. In the end, the decision to sunset can be a highly nuanced and emotional conversation. It is also a necessary conversation if funders are to make best use of their most precious resource: time.

Getting started

Funders interested in forming or re-forming a funder collaborative can get started with these three steps:

1. [Review the additional resources curated by the Education First team below.](#)

2. [Use this guide to work through three considerations funders should consider to determine collaborative form.](#)

3. [Connect with an Education First team member to share more about your collaborative and get our advice on next steps.](#)

Recommended resources

Resources by Education First

Breaking the Status Quo: Effective & Actionable Funder Collaboratives
Education First partnered with the director of the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative to create this presentation highlighting the factors that make for an effective funder collaborative, based on our experience facilitating the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative. The information in this presentation highlights the factors that make for an effective funder collaborative and includes reflection on the collaborative's progress within each of the factors. Full citation.

Funder Collaborations—Flourish or Flounder?
The article reflects on funding efforts by Education First and the Hewlett Foundation and on lessons learned about why some funder collaboratives are more effective. The article also provides an overview of key milestones for funder collaboratives. Full citation.

How Funder Collaborations Flourish: Lessons from the Common Core Standards
Education First developed this guide to help funders collaborate to support adoption of the Common Core Standards. It remains a helpful reference for funders seeking to support systems-level change on other critical education issues. The decision-making matrix mentioned in this field guide originates here. Full citation.

Other helpful resources

Best Practices of Collaboration
This guide by Candid offers another perspective on the funder collaborative life cycle. Full citation.

Collaborative Giving Philanthropy Roadmap
Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors developed this roadmap for those seeking to start a funder collaborative. It offers a typology of collaboratives, considerations for getting started and guidance for avoiding common pitfalls. Full citation.

Funder Collaboratives: Why and How Funders Work Together
This GrantCraft guide offers reflections from members of funder collaboratives about their experiences working together. It also includes case studies that showcase a range of different collaborative types. Full citation.

Lessons from a Ten-Year Funder Collaborative:
A Case Study of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa
This case study on the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa offers a detailed example of the design and impact of a long-term funder collaborative. Full citation.

Value of Collaboration Research Study
This literature review by The Bridgespan Group summarizes the types, benefits of and enabling factors for funder collaboratives. Full citation.

Common challenges and mitigation strategies

Phase 1: Form (Re-form)	
Challenge	**Mitigation Strategy**
Vague problem definition, goals and idea of what success looks like	Use the Education First Funder Collaborative Decision-Making Matrix to help clarify problems to address, scope of collective action, strategy and timeline for achieving shared goals. Establish a tentative end date for the collaborative along with "SMART" goals. Spend time as a group envisioning the specific, observable changes in the field that you would like to see and use a pre-mortem process to identify indicators for sunset.
Inattention to how collaborative members work together	Make sure planning conversations include development of community agreements that meet the needs of all members. Ensure clear decision-making rules regardless of the type of collaborative, determine both who are the decision-makers and how that decision-making authority will be put into practice (such as one vote per member regardless of contribution or fist-to-five voting process).
Overplanning	Let some aspects of the collaborative remain unresolved while you make initial exploratory grants. Create and use tools that guard against inaction such as a risk continuum and placing percentages for dollars granted across the continuum.
Under/over staffed	Proactively engage in honest conversation about member capacity to schedule and facilitate meetings, capture notes and action items, coordinate with guest speakers and other collaborative activities. Where needed, secure additional support from foundation staff or a consultant. When re-forming, revisit these decisions and make adjustments as needed. Balance the scope of collective action with the investment in capacity to support the collaborative.

Phase 2: Launch

Challenge	Mitigation Strategy
Transactional funder behaviors	Focus early meetings on relationship development and trust building to counterbalance transactional energy. This can come through activities such as developing values and/or norms statements together, identifying the "why" to collaborate, sharing theories of action by each individual foundation and the working context of staff within those foundations to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of why individuals are deciding to engage in the collaborative.
Member concerns that the collaborative isn't producing results	Establish a short-term goal that can act as a "quick win" to demonstrate the value of the collaborative. Identify examples of collaborative efforts that created results not achievable by an individual foundation because of impact or scale.

Phase 3: Maintain

Challenge	Mitigation Strategy
Adjusting to changing field conditions	Create opportunities to refine the collaborative's goals and agreements in alignment with the decision-making structure and the proposed timeline of the collaborative. Ensure space for learning from the field as part of the collaborative, and use the group's established learning and evaluation processes as opportunities to adapt strategies.
Flagging funder participation and interest	Establish member participation expectations and organizational commitments up front. Maintain a dynamic meeting format and update the collective agenda to align with the current policy context and current funder strategies. Make sure to incorporate group and individual check-in processes—to avoid having to guess why funder interest or participation is flagging. Facilitate transparent conversations to address the causes.
Shift in individual members' funding strategies	During the "Form" phase, acknowledge shifts in the interests, staffing and strategies of participating funders are likely to occur. Make a plan for how the group plans to respond (e.g., develop a clear "offboarding" process).

Phase 4: Reflect and Assess

Challenge	Mitigation Strategy
Difficult to understand or unrealistic outcomes across grants/activities	Begin with the end in mind, and be bold but realistic. As part of the planning process and ongoing learning, continually reassess whether the resources (e.g., human, financial) are aligned with the desired outcomes. Ensure that the collaborative continues to have agreement on how they will measure progress and has the capacity to gather the data against those measures on an agreed upon timeline.
Member impatience	Structure learning/evaluation efforts to focus on outputs as well as short- and long-term outcomes so that members can see progress toward the collaborative's ultimate goal. Celebrate wins—both in process and in outcomes—and name wins that are a result of working collaboratively that would not have been achieved individually.
Missed opportunity to share findings and reflections with other funders and the broader field	Plan for dedicated "share out" activities that elevate the work of the collaborative and how the collaborative works. Share successes but also highlight challenges so other funder collaboratives are aware of sticky spots but have ideas and resources to get "unstuck." Stay committed to routinely sharing about the work, even if it feels as if there's nothing to share; your experience will be valuable to others. It also removes the "black box" feeling that grantees sometimes experience with funder collaboratives that are less public.

Phase 5: Sunset

Challenge	Mitigation Strategy
Knowing when to stop	Return to the initial questions that brought the group together in the first place. Revisit the pre-mortem activity and engage in a comparison of accomplishments expected/desired vs. achieved, assess engagement (including participation rates, contributions, etc.).
Poor documentation of collaborative activities, accomplishments and lessons learned	Determine level of documentation desired by collaborative members at the outset and invest in that documentation process (e.g., internal staff, external evaluator). Identify learning questions at the outset and establish a process to collect ongoing data. Identify learning questions at the outset and establish a process for answering them, including a timeline and responsibilities for data collection, analysis and reporting. Be sure the process includes a plan to document accomplishments and lessons learned.

Recent funder collaboratives facilitated by Education First

California Education Funder Collaborative
California Postsecondary Funder Collaborative
Data Funder Collaborative
Emerging Bilingual Collaborative
Forefront Human Capital Funder Group

Funder Collaborative for Innovative Measurement
Innovations in Assessment and New Measures
Place-based Funders Learning Network
Teacher Workforce Funder Collaborative
Twin City Funder Collaborative on Principal Quality

California Education Funder Collaborative *(2014–present)*

The California Education Funder Collaborative (CEFC) was formed in 2014 as the California Common Core Funder Collaborative. The group's initial efforts sought to leverage philanthropic resources to support implementation of new learning standards California (and many other states) had adopted at that time. Following this initial effort, participants engaged in a period of reflection about how best to continue accommodating the shared interests of various members; participants opted to broaden their focus to include learning about a wider set of school improvement issues relevant to California schools (and also to settle on the collaborative's current, more inclusive name). As part of this shift, between 2017 and 2018, participating funders co-supported a massive state education research effort, Getting Down to Facts, which offered evaluations and evidence to inform policy debates in the state about education funding and school improvement.

Today, the collaborative sees itself as a learning community and a forum for a variety of funders to look across their varied individual strategies and to consider emerging needs, trends and policy developments relevant to their grantmaking. The current version of CEFC seeks opportunities for enhanced collaboration, content-specific learning and collective action for its participating funder members.

As of 2024, collaborative members include: Ballmer Group, Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, California Community Foundation, California Endowment, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Heising-Simons Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, San Diego Foundation, Silicon Valley Community Foundation, Silver Giving Foundation, Sobrato Philanthropies, and Stuart Foundation.

For more information on CEFC see this recent member update memo.

California Postsecondary Funder Collaborative *(2019–present)*

The California Postsecondary Funder Collaborative (CAPSFC) formed and launched in 2019 with the goal of harnessing philanthropic resources to accelerate postsecondary access and success in California. The group defined itself as both a learning network for participants and an effort to better align individual grantmaking decisions and investments across multiple funders.

Through 2023, in addition to full group convenings and exploration of emerging issues, CAPSFC

member funders participated in at least one of three workgroups (Affordability, Pathways and Enrollment) to share information and make aligned investments. For example, in 2022, the group collaborated with the California Student Aid Commission to host a state-wide meeting focused on broadening the reach of the Learning-Aligned Employment Program. The collaborative includes a mix of national and state-based funders highlighting the importance of California's large and diverse student population for many higher education funders. CAPSFC is in a phase of re-forming and members are currently discussing what structure and activities can support the group beyond 2023. Education First facilitated the Collaborative through its first four years.

As of 2024, collaborative members include: Ballmer Group, Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, College Futures Foundation, ECMC Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, Lumina Foundation, San Diego Foundation, Strada Education Foundation, Stuart Foundation, Stupski Foundation, and Teagle Foundation.

For more information on CAPSFC, see this recent overview document.

Data Funder Collaborative
(2017–present)

The Data Funder Collaborative formed and launched in late 2017 as both a learning network and an effort to align members' grantmaking to advance changes in social sector data systems. The collaborative works to "maximize the social impact achieved by funders of data-oriented initiatives," according to its founding documents, with a specific focus on P16 education, workforce and health data system operability: the ethics of data use in policy-making: and use of data for improvement.

As of 2024, current members include: Arnold Ventures, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, Ford Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Heising-Simons Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation.

For more information on this funder collaborative, see this background document.

Emerging Bilingual Collaborative
(2019–present)

The Emerging Bilingual Collaborative formed and launched in 2019 as a pooled fund focused on improving support for multilingual learners in the California education system with specific emphasis on educator preparation, development and mobilization. With support from Education First, participating funders developed and began to invest using a shared theory of action. After an assessment and reflection phase, Education First helped the collaborative hire staff to support its ongoing operation through the group's jointly determined 2030 sunset date. The collaborative is now supported by a full-time director with Education First serving as advisor to the participating member funders.

As of 2024, current and previous collaborative members: California Community Foundation, Heising-Simons Foundation, James B. McClatchy Foundation, Kenneth Rainin Foundation, Silver Giving Foundation, and Sobrato Philanthropies.

More information about the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative is available here. You can view the collaborative's shared theory of action here.

Forefront Human Capital Funder Group *(2018–present)*

The Forefront Human Capital Funder Group is a Chicago-area funder collaborative focused on supporting teachers and administrators in the public school system in Chicago. The collaborative was formed in 2018 and has been through three cycles of work, each with a different focus that evolves to meet changing needs in the school system. The group meets 3–4 times per year with a learning agenda informed by all members and ultimately established by the group's steering committee.

As of 2024, collaborative members include: Brinson Foundation, Chicago Public Education Fund, Circle of Service, CME Group Foundation, Crown Family Philanthropies, Finnegan Family Foundation, Fry Foundation, Joyce Foundation, McCormick Foundation, McDougal Foundation, Osa Foundation, Polk Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Steans Foundation, and Stone Foundation.

More information about the Forefront Human Capital Funder Group's recent learning agenda is available here.

Funder Collaborative for Innovative Measurement *(2015–2019)*

The Funder Collaborative for Innovative Measurement formed and launched in 2015 as an attempt to galvanize public and private efforts to develop assessments for "hard to measure" intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies. The group operated primarily as a learning network, but used an investment-alignment approach to support several anchor projects, including the RAND Repository Project, Harvard University's Taxonomy Project and an Assessment Work Group at CASEL. Following an assessment and reflection phase in 2019, the group decided to sunset operations as a stand alone collaborative and merge their group with a similar learning network facilitated by Grantmakers for Thriving Youth.

Collaborative members included: S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Einhorn Family Charitable Trust, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Oak Foundation, One8 Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Rodel Foundation, Spencer Foundation, James Walton Fund, The Wallace Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation.

More information about the Funder Collaborative for Innovative Measurement is available here.

Innovations in Assessment and New Measures *(2019–2023)*

The Innovations in Assessment and New Measures funder collaborative formed and launched in 2019 as a pooled fund designed to spur creation of new educational testing models and promote new ideas to improve federal accountability requirements. Grantees of the collaborative—including The New Mexico Graduation Equity Initiative, KIPP Public Schools, Texas Education Agency, Summit Public Schools and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education—used a human-centered equitable design approach to create innovative approaches to summative assessments. The collaborative's work has spurred momentum for through-year assessments and created space for policy and advocacy grantees to think about what's next for school improvement, assessment and accountability.

Collaborative members included: Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation.

More information about the Innovations in Assessment and New Measures collaborative is available here.

Place-based Funders Learning Network
(2021–present)

Founded in 2021, the Place-based Funders Learning Network brings together large national education funders who operate in ways that rely on the theory that their path to impact is intimately connected to place-based factors—i.e., factors at play in pre-mapped geographic boundaries at the neighborhood, city or regional levels.

As of 2024, current collaborative members include: Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Joyce Foundation, and Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

Click here to access a literature review that has guided some of this collaborative's work.

Teacher Workforce Funder Collaborative
(2015–present)

The National Teacher Workforce Funders Collaborative (TWFC) is a learning network that engages over 40 members. With facilitation support from Education First, the collaborative works to (1) keep funders up to speed on cutting edge teacher preparation work going on in the field, from the perspective of higher education, district, and nonprofit leaders, including innovative and effective responses to teacher shortages, (2) reflect on funders' strategies in response to field needs and identify work that funders can collectively pursue and support to make progress in key areas, and (3) build and strengthen relationships among funders. Led by a five member steering committee, the collaborative meets four times each, with three virtual meetings highlighting bright spots in the field and one in person meeting which includes time to reflect and set the learning agenda for the next year.

Current and previous collaborative members include: Above and Beyond Teaching, Barr Foundation, Belk Foundation, Bezos Family Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Chamberlin Education Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Charles Butt Foundation, City Education Partners, Consortium of Florida Education Foundations, Center for Racial Equity in Education, Crown Family Philanthropies, Cullen Foundation, Education Forward, Emerson Collective, Giving Forward, Good Reason Houston, Heising-Simons Foundation, Hollyhock Foundation, Houston Endowment, Jacksonville Public Education Fund, James S. McDonnell Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies, New Schools for Baton Rouge, New Schools for New Orleans, Overdeck Family Foundation, Powell Foundation, Robertson Foundation, Robin Hood Foundation, Schusterman Family Philanthropies, Silver Giving Foundation, Sobrato Philanthropies, Spencer Foundation, Ten Acre Foundation, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The California Community Foundation, The Peter and Carmen Lucia Buck Foundation, T.L.L. Temple Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, William Penn Foundation and Yellow Chair Foundation.

A summary of recent meetings of the Teacher Workforce Funder Collaborative is available here.

Twin City Funder Collaborative on Principal Quality
(2018–2020)

Education First worked with a set of funders to research principal quality in the Twin Cities to inform improvement initiatives that will ensure every school building is led by a high-quality school leader. The research aimed to help the funders better understand the landscape to help inform grantmaking, support and steps Minnesota stakeholders can take to boost the effectiveness of school leaders in the Twin Cities and statewide.

Collaborative members included: Carlson Family Foundation, GHR Foundation, Graves Foundation, Joyce Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Minneapolis Foundation, Minnesota Comeback, and Sauer Family Foundation.

Endnotes
1 Powell, Wolf Ditkoff and Hassey (2019).
2 Porter and James (2016), Huang and Seldon (2014) and GrantCraft (2009).
3 Porter, James, Medina and Chow (2017) and The Connect U.S. Fund (2016).
4 Porter, James, Medina and Chow (2017).
5 Porter, James, Medina and Chow (2017).
6 Kegan, The Evolving Self (1983).

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