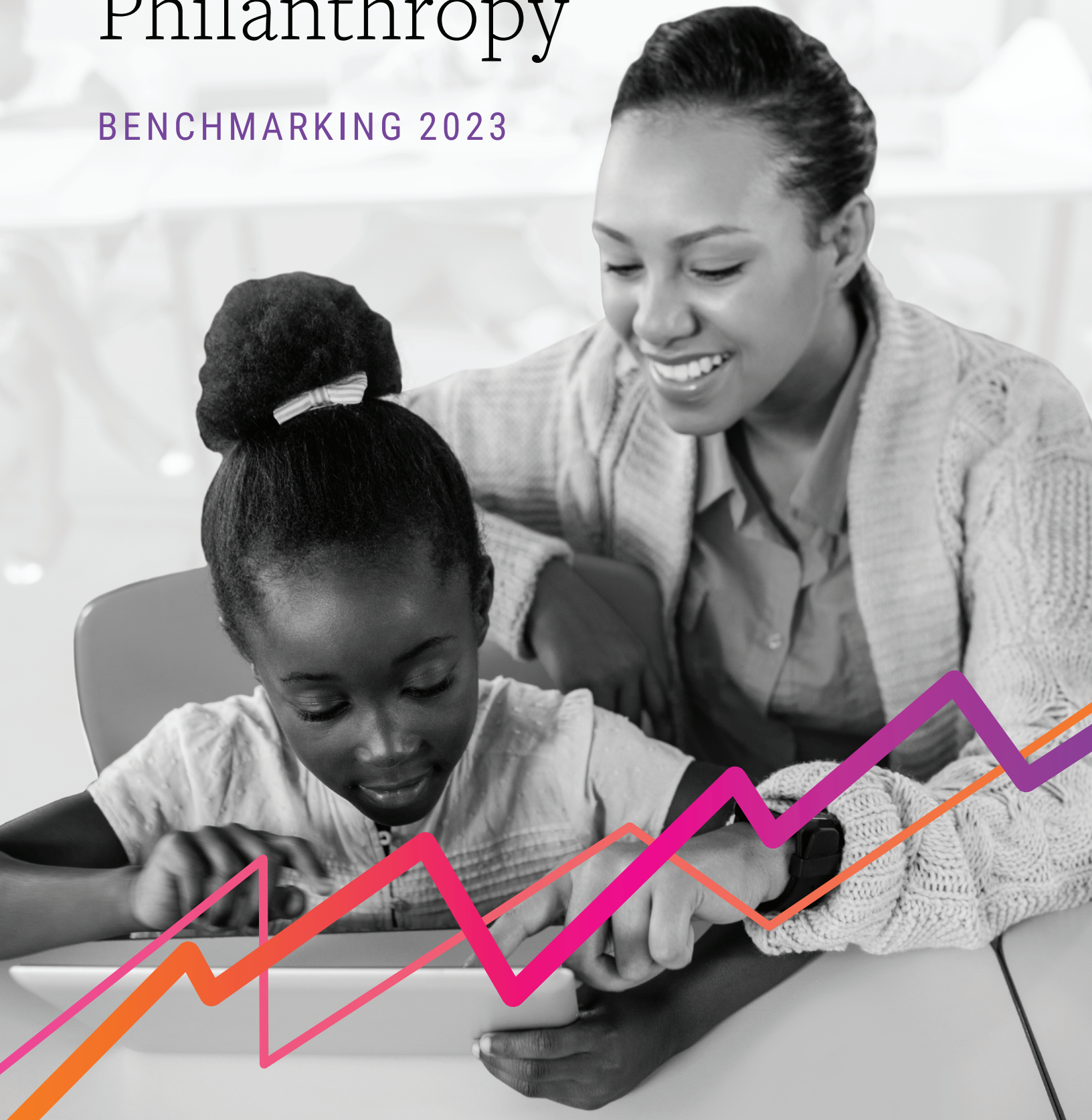**Grantmakers**
FOR EDUCATION

Trends in Education Philanthropy

BENCHMARKING 2023

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Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2023

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Foreword

DEAR COLLEAGUES,

Education is what researchers call a "dynamic system"—meaning that any movement within the system alters the entire structure. Students' lives are impacted by poverty, healthcare, housing and food insecurity, and those experiences ripple through their experience of education. As grantmakers, our funding decisions have effects that may not be immediately obvious to us, but often are very apparent to the young people, communities and organizations we seek to serve. Our choices impact their broader contexts, either for better or for worse.

As the nation's largest association of education funders, Grantmakers for Education gathers information from funders whose work spans the education spectrum. Since 2008, we have been tracking trends in education, helping you to situate your grantmaking within them. Thank you to all those who took the time to complete this most recent survey. Your participation allowed us to develop a composite picture of the state of education philanthropy in 2023.

Our first benchmarking survey, released fifteen years ago in 2008, coincided with an era in education that was largely defined by a focus on standards, assessment, school turnaround and teacher quality. By 2018, we saw education funders expanding their definition of educational equity to include not only academic outcomes but also social, emotional and personal outcomes. Funding priorities shifted accordingly.

The 2023 report shows that these trends have continued, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social and emotional learning, mental health services and wraparound supports within the K-12 sector are all popular areas among this year's respondents, with an emphasis on serving the whole learner. Early childhood education, postsecondary education and career pathways also remain top priorities, though we are seeing a disconnect between areas of stated importance and the share of dollars invested in the work.

Notably, two-thirds of this year's respondents say they are now funding education system redesign/transformation, the most popular of all funding categories (though funders have quite varied ideas about what constitutes transformation and redesign). This seems to reflect national conversations about racial justice, and the limitations of reform in a campaign for true and lasting equity.

Respondents agree that in order to have positive impact, funders must adapt their approaches to the complexity of U.S. education today. While respondents express a strong interest in collaborative funding to address complex challenges, the investment there remains relatively low.

Overall, this report suggests we need many more conversations in the field to establish what we mean by terms such as "system transformation," "whole learner" and "collective impact." Can we articulate a shared vision of the learning experience we want our young people to have? What would it take for this vision to be inclusive and compelling enough to overpower the forces currently working to undermine public education? How can we help funders invest—collaboratively—in a public education infrastructure that will make this vision a reality?

I am grateful to the team of writers and editors, especially Steven Lawrence, who supported us in the survey administration, analysis and writing.

I am eager to discuss the findings in depth with all of you, and look forward to hearing how you use them to inform your own work.

My best,

Ulcca Joshi Hansen
Co-Interim Executive Director and Chief Program Officer
Grantmakers for Education

Key Insights and Questions

This document is the latest Grantmakers for Education's (EdFunders) study of what's now and what's next for education philanthropy. It aims to give insight into the priorities of the education funding community, and to help funders understand their role in supporting education innovation that benefits the nation's learners. The findings in this report are based on survey responses representing 142 grantmaking organizations, 70% of which are EdFunders members. This section calls out the results at a high level; the full report takes a deeper look into each of these findings, providing data, context and some of the thinking behind respondents' answers.

Big Picture Trends in Education Philanthropy

Since Grantmakers for Education conducted its last benchmarking survey in 2018, the country has experienced a global pandemic, a reckoning with systems that perpetually disadvantage communities of color and poor communities, and a subsequent backlash against that reckoning. In the wake of this, survey respondents highlighted three trends that are having an impact, cutting across major focus areas in education philanthropy.

- **Funders' expanded approach to the social-emotional needs of learners includes addressing trauma and the negative impacts of racial injustice.** A majority of respondents are investing in social and emotional learning and/or mental health and trauma-informed care, as well as wraparound social service supports for children and families. Wraparound supports ranked high among trends considered most likely to improve educational access and outcomes.

- **Funders have major concerns about the politicization of education.** The current polarization of American politics has led to a highly politicized educational environment, especially at the K-12 level. Among factors most likely to have a negative impact on education over the next five years, the politicization of education was ranked first by far.

- **Funders' growing desire to overhaul the education system reflects a wide range of approaches.** More than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they fund educational system redesign and transformation, the most commonly funded of all 37 priority areas in the survey. At the same time, respondents' perspectives on what constitutes system redesign and transformation varies widely. Some describe a fundamental re-examination of what education is and how it is organized; others continue to envision specific reforms within the existing system.

Trends in Philanthropic Practice in Education

Following the lead of prior benchmarking studies, we examined trends in three areas of philanthropic practice: advancing education equity; undertaking and supporting public policy-related activities; and establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships. The latest edition also highlights a new trend: a growing commitment by funders to address power dynamics in grantmaking.

- **Equity remains a priority.** When asked to identify the trends most likely to have a positive impact on education over the next five years, respondents pointed most often to areas addressing diversity, equity and inclusion. Nearly all indicated focusing on one or more historically underserved populations

in their funding, and more than two-thirds reported that their organization actively invests in efforts to increase educational equity. At the same time, funder definitions of equity ranged from culturally responsive practice to systems change.

- **Public policy is an area of focus in spite of less favorable local contexts.** More than half of respondents support public policy and advocacy as part of their strategy to strengthen the education field, and pointed to a particularly favorable environment at the federal level. However, the share of respondents that described the policy environment at the local level as at least moderately favorable dropped from 72% to 58%. Multiple factors may be influencing this trend, but the politicization of education at the local level is a major factor.

- **Interest in funder collaboration is not matched by levels of funding.** Ninety-one percent of respondents reported engaging in some type of collaborative activity, the same share as in 2018. Respondents were most likely to belong to funder learning networks and/or affinity groups. For the first time, a majority of respondents also indicated that their organizations had engaged in pooled funding during the prior year, although for most, this funding—along with aligned grantmaking—represents less than 5% of their total giving.

- **Funders increase efforts to be responsive to power dynamics, grantee perspectives and youth voice in funding decisions.** About half of respondents are involved in or considering grantmaking practices that respond more directly to grantee partner and community needs (e.g., trust-based philanthropy, participatory grant-making and responsive philanthropy). Several funders said they had been committed to these practices for a long time. Consistent with these findings, some felt that traditional philanthropic practices had a strong potential to do harm in the education sphere.

Trends in Education Giving

Similar to the 2018 survey, this year's survey assessed education giving in four categories: early learning, K-12 education, postsecondary education and workforce/career pathways, and education initiatives that extend beyond formal educational environments.

- **Early Learning.** Funders have increased their focus on early learning in recent years, and support will continue to grow. Nonetheless, grant dollars for early learning will remain modest relative to other priorities.

- **K-12 Education.** Though academic learning loss in the wake of the pandemic is a concern cited in the media, funders do not appear to be focused on core academics as a singular priority. Instead, funders are showing strong support for educational system redesign and transformation. Grantmakers see the value of technology to personalize learning but also have concerns about the impact of technology and social media on young people.

- **Postsecondary and Career Pathways.** This remains a top priority for funders, and resources in this area will likely grow over the next several years. The largest share of postsecondary funding goes to support access for historically marginalized students. Creating alternate pathways into careers also ranks high among funder priorities.

- **Beyond Classrooms and Schools.** Funders are doubling down on a desire to embrace the totality of learners' experiences, strengths and needs in and out of the classroom, with a whole learner approach and out-of-school time support. Funding is likely to increase going forward. More funders are also engaging student voice and supporting student advocacy as key elements in systems transformation.

Looking Ahead:
Critical Questions Shaping the Future of Education

Based on the totality of the survey responses, Grantmakers for Education highlighted five questions for funders to consider as they reflect on the findings and their next steps:

1 Can we articulate a shared vision for the learning experience we want our young people to have that does not pit academic learning against efforts to meet the social, emotional and developmental needs of young people?

2 What is the appetite and capacity of our sector to collaborate on a new public education system designed to support equity and reflect the science of learning and human development?

3 How can funders best support the efforts of young people, families, communities and policymakers to give all students an education that prepares them to contribute to their communities and the workforce?

4 How can we get boards, staff and grantees involved in the kinds of relationship-building, skills development and policy redesign that enables truly equitable grantmaking practice?

5 In light of technological advances, how do we need to reconsider the mindsets, skills and knowledge that young people need in their formal education?

STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2023 enables readers to consider big picture trends affecting the field, explore cross-cutting areas of foundation practice, access and compare key learnings and statistics across identified entry points to education and consider critical questions that will shape education in coming years. The report also offers four Funder Spotlights that show how trends from the survey are being applied in the field. These spotlights illustrate why and how education funders are working to advance equity, provide ideal early learning experiences, explore place-based strategies and support postsecondary career pathways.

This report is based on survey responses representing 142 education grantmaking organizations, including 100 members of Grantmakers for Education. About two-thirds of respondents identified as family, private or independent foundations. More than half have a place- based approach, and nearly two-fifths fund at the state and/or national levels. Because respondents represent only a small fraction of U.S. foundation, corporate or other private funders of education these findings should be interpreted only as trends among survey respondents, not conclusive for education philanthropy as a whole.

Comparisons with earlier benchmarking studies are generally limited to broad trends, with occasional references to changes in shares of funders. As the size and composition of survey samples has changed with each study, distributions presented in each benchmarking study are in general not directly comparable. For more details, sew Appendix A: Methodology.

Introduction

In the four years since the last Grantmakers for Education benchmark study, U.S. educational settings from early learning to postsecondary have had to adapt on the fly to remote learning, absenteeism and declining enrollment, staffing shortages, learning interruptions and all the other effects of a once-in-a-century crisis. The resilience and adaptability of this system impressed many observers.

The pandemic also highlighted the role of educational settings as a frontline social safety net, partnering with community-based organizations to provide food and other services to children and families. With a return to in-person learning, educators are now responding to the mental health and behavioral challenges that arose from the trauma of the pandemic and learners' extended isolation from their peers.
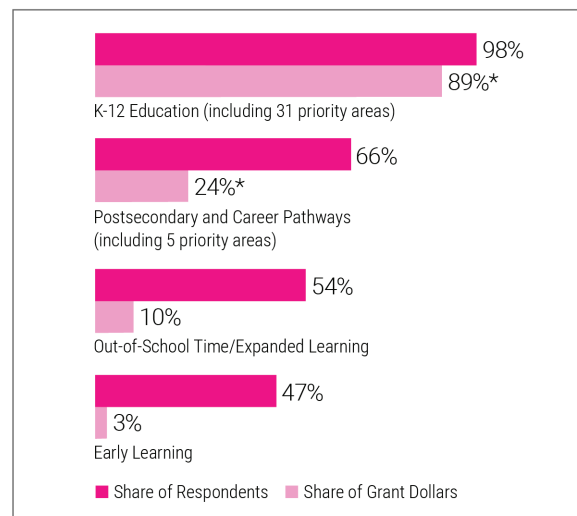
Since the last benchmarking study, the United States has also experienced a heightened awareness of systemic racial injustice, following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and countless others by those charged to protect their communities. The resulting movements for racial justice have touched all parts of society, including educational settings. In turn, we have seen a backlash against addressing the legacies of systemic oppression in learning institutions.

How is the grantmaking community responding to these new circumstances, to an educational system still recovering from the pandemic, facing long-standing inequities and adapting to the needs of a generation of tech-enmeshed learners?

This report, the latest in a series released by EdFunders starting in 2008, offers funders a view on "what's next" for education philanthropy and seeks to show how funder priorities fit into broader trends in the field. It includes analyses of responses to the latest Grantmakers for Education benchmarking survey and incorporates funder commentary for context.

Chapter 1 identifies three cross-cutting trends that are likely to impact education over the next several years. Chapter 2 tracks the evolution of philanthropic practice by education funders in the areas of education equity, public policy, collaboration and grantmaking approaches. Chapter 3 looks at education giving for early learning, the K-12 level, postsecondary education and workforce/career pathways, and giving aimed at the whole learner and out-of-school time. Finally, Chapter 4 poses critical questions for education funders engaged in considering how to best serve the needs of today's learners.

2023 Funding for Early Learning, K-12 Education, Out-of-School Time and Postsecondary Education

K-12 Education (including 31 priority areas) — 98% / 89%*

Postsecondary and Career Pathways (including 5 priority areas) — 66% / 24%*

Out-of-School Time/Expanded Learning — 54% / 10%

Early Learning — 47% / 3%

■ Share of Respondents ■ Share of Grant Dollars

*Funding may be counted toward more than one funding priority within the categories of K-12 Education and Postsecondary Education and Workforce/Career Pathways. Therefore, figures likely overestimate the total share of giving focused on this category.

1 Big Picture Trends in Education Philanthropy

Much has changed since we conducted our prior survey in 2018. The country has experienced a global pandemic, a reckoning with systemic oppression and a subsequent backlash against that reckoning. In the wake of this period, survey respondents highlighted three trends that are having an impact, cutting across major focus areas in education philanthropy.

Support for social and emotional learning, mental health services and wraparound supports is strong.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the role educational institutions and out-of-school partners play in supporting young people in ways that go beyond core academic learning. As students returned in person, educators saw widespread evidence of trauma—whether from the pandemic or other factors. Respondents seem to be concluding that if students are to learn, they will need to access mental health and trauma-informed care both in and out of school.

In 2018, we were already seeing funder priorities shift away from a core academic focus on standards, assessment, school turnaround and teacher quality; these priorities were at their highest in the 2012 survey. This decline appears to have been the beginning of a major redefinition within education philanthropy not only of education reform, but of what educational equity necessitates. In the 2018 survey, we saw increasing interest in restorative justice, wraparound supports and ensuring the social and emotional well-being of young people. Funders indicated that this was due to growing recognition of the economic, health, housing and food inequities that impact children and families from our most marginalized communities, and the fact that the trauma of these inequities remains with young people throughout their years in formal education.

In the latest benchmarking survey, a majority of respondents reported providing support for social and emotional learning (62%) and mental health/trauma-informed care (62%). In 2018, only 33% of respondents reported supporting social and emotional learning. This emphasis on a learning experience that incorporates social, emotional, behavioral and physical well-being, is sometimes referred to as a "whole learner" approach. Close to half of respondents (46%) anticipate increasing support for mental health/trauma-informed care over the next two years. As one respondent observed, "children need to be ready socially and emotionally in order to learn academically."

Several respondents expressed concern about a lack of mental health services. "Kids under overwhelming stress can't learn," one said. Another identified potential barriers to increasing support for mental health services for learners as being "COVID fatigue [on the part of educators] and a [push to] return to normalcy."

Funders expressed concern that students in the post-pandemic environment will also need wraparound social service supports, aimed at bolstering children and their families. "Many of our education priorities focus not just on youth/children but also their families," one respondent wrote. "This holistic view [addresses] the challenge that youth have in being successful when non-academic factors in their lives are creating barriers." Among respondents' current funding priorities, "wraparound supports" is considered among the most likely to improve educational access and outcomes.

While many funders are focusing on whole learner and wraparound strategies exclusively within educational institutions, others are engaging out-of-school time programs and community supports. "We think the possibility of re-engaging youth and healing through developmental relationships is very strong in out-of-school time," one said, "and that informal pedagogy has the potential to elevate youth voice and give them a needed sense of agency and interest." Another respondent who supports these priorities in- and out-of-school added, "Engaged communities, along with outstanding school boards, educators, principals, and schools, lead to improved learning opportunities and outcomes, which lead to whole child development."

Reflecting this focus on the whole learner, many funders are emphasizing the role of student voice in the educational process. For the first time in the 2023 survey, EdFunders asked about student voice, and 57% of respondents reported funding for initiatives in this area. Almost half of this subset of respondents (48%) anticipate increasing their investment over the next two years.

Education funders are concerned about the politicization of education.

The polarization of American politics is now playing out in local and state educational institutions, especially at the K-12 level. Hundreds of campaigns across the country aim to control local school boards, narrow curricular content and restrict instructional decisions in schools. Even when these initiatives do not result in rulemaking, school officials and educators may feel pressure to narrow discussion on political topics, history and culture for fear of reprisal. Among the factors respondents considered most likely to negatively impact education in the next five years, politicization was by far the top concern.

Top Trends Impacting Education*

POTENTIAL FOR POSITIVE IMPACT	POTENTIAL FOR NEGATIVE IMPACT
1. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)	1. Politicization of Education
2. Pathways for Postsecondary Careers	2. Public School Financing
3. Personalized Learning	3. Teacher Shortage
4. Pedagogy and Curriculum	4. Pandemic Learning Loss
5. Community/Family Engagement	5. Technology
6. Mental Health	6. Lack of Innovative Ideas
7. College Affordability	7. Mental Health
8. Public School Financing	8. Pedagogy and Curriculum
9. Public Policy	9. Philanthropy
10. Student Voice/Advocacy	10. Privatization

* Ranking based on coding of open-ended responses to the question, "What are up to three factors or trends you think have the greatest potential for a positive [or negative] impact on education over the next five years?"

"Devaluation of curriculum and resources that present a fuller picture of our country's history, even if it is hard for some, can lead to a lack of sensitivity and perspectives that do not fully see others," one respondent said. Another described how "threats around teaching content and curriculum that accurately educate students about race, class, gender and other identities…will make it more difficult for students to develop critical thinking skills and respect and appreciate people who are different from them. It may also have a chilling effect on the educator workforce." A third noted that "all sorts of made-up crises in education ranging from critical race theory to transgender bathrooms [are] only going to divide people and make school boards ideological rather than driven by results." Another respondent pointed out where this could lead: "leaders and educators focusing on 'keeping the peace' rather than trying innovative techniques focused on equity."

Respondents did not describe in great detail how their organizations planned to address this challenge, though one described an affirmative strategy focused on education advocacy and narrative change, accompanied by support for local organizations and community foundations. Others mentioned they are funding adult advocacy and student voice initiatives.

Support for redesigning and transforming the educational system signals a fundamental shift.

Education funders appear poised to support a fundamental rethinking of American education. In response to the first-ever question on the topic in this survey, 68% of respondents said they currently fund efforts to redesign and transform the system. This goal was ranked first among 37 priority areas included in the survey, and the category accounts for 7% of grant dollars awarded by respondents overall for education—also among the highest shares.

Funders' definitions of transformation and change varied widely, however. Some characterized it as a fundamental re-examination of what education is and how it is done, while others viewed it as emphasizing or reforming specific elements of the existing educational system.

The argument for a wholesale reconceptualization of the educational system was summed up by two respondents, one who commented, "The institution of schooling needs radical changes to prepare children to thrive in a global and digital economy." The second said that we need to shift our thinking about the very purpose of education to put a "stronger focus on human thriving and flourishing."

Responses to the survey within three priority areas seem to illustrate the distinction between funders' conceptions of redesign and transformation: personalized learning; the role of technology; and individual schools as the focus for change. With respect to personalized learning, funders differ on whether personalization means facilitating instruction in ways that enable students to progress at an individual pace within an existing curriculum, or is about ensuring that a student's education is driven by their personal interests, goals and needs. With respect to technology, some funders view technology as a vehicle for more efficiently and effectively enabling access to an existing curriculum, while others consider it a tool for fundamentally shifting where, how, when and with whom learning happens.

When it comes to thinking about schools as units for change, some funders are working to improve education by improving the quality of the academic, social, emotional and wraparound supports available to students in schools, while others are questioning whether schools as currently structured represent a barrier to improving education, given the restrictions on how students and educators can organize learning.

Respondents whose focus remains more on iterating within the existing system wrote about personalized learning in terms of tutoring or high-dosage tutoring, or supporting an increase in mentoring, advising and coaching for students within their current programs. They pointed to technology as a way to deliver existing standards and content more effectively through

remote instruction or tech platforms that enable self-paced learning. With respect to school-based change, these respondents wrote about their interest in supporting whole child, wraparound, social-emotional and community or family engagement efforts—seeming to be less opposed to school-turnaround or school improvement, but rather emphasizing the need for change and improvement efforts to consider more than low academic performance. One respondent noted, "I still believe in schools as a unit of change [but] school turnaround/improvement has fallen off the radar." The data appear to support this. In 2015, respondents reported allocating about 2.5% of grant dollars to turning around low-performing schools. That number dropped to 2% in 2018, and in 2023 it stands at 0.1%.
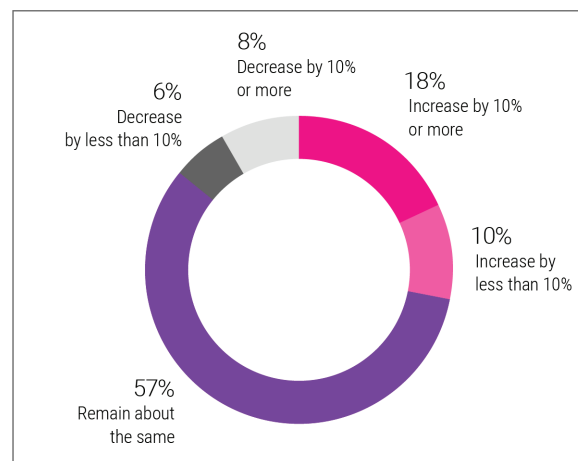
Respondents whose work and responses were more focused on wholesale reconceptualization described personalized learning as an effort to "measure and attune deeply to student experience" or to enable "project-based or truly student-centered learning versus superficial learning." One of these respondents noted that "student-centered learning has the greatest impact because it can be adapted to meet the varied priorities, needs and ambitions of students and their communities." For these respondents, school turnaround is not a viable pathway to change. "We have moved away from programs that are dependent on a single teacher [or school] to sustain them. We are focusing on systems change," wrote one respondent. Another indicated that they had moved away from school turnaround because there was too much "turnover to make systems change." In terms of technology, one discussed working on "design related to software simulations that support student-centered learning" as a way to use technology to further fundamentally different approaches to instruction.

Several respondents focused on brain-based learning—which draws on the neuroscience of development to create curriculum and lesson design—as a critical element of a transformed educational system. "[It] has the potential to totally attend to all students in school

systems, not just most," one respondent said. Another noted that, "New learning environments based on research and strong theories of action can improve student outcomes, especially when they are learner-centered and support students socio-emotionally."

Efforts at either transformation or more intentional systems-alignment will necessitate policy change. Perhaps for that reason a majority of respondents (55%) are engaging in public policy advocacy and organizing. Policymakers at the federal and state level are still very reluctant to consider fundamental changes to the education system. In light of funders' concerns about efforts to roll back students' rights and equity-enabling policies, policy and advocacy work seems likely to remain an area of active investment. (See Chapter 2 of this report for more details on current support for public policy and advocacy.)

Change in Anticipated Education Grants Budgets in the Next Fiscal Year

8%
Decrease by 10% or more

18%
Increase by 10% or more

6%
Decrease by less than 10%

10%
Increase by less than 10%

57%
Remain about the same

2 Trends in Philanthropic Practice in Education

Previous benchmarking studies have tracked three areas of philanthropic practice: advancing education equity; undertaking and supporting public policy-related activities; and establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships. The 2023 report continues this pattern and adds a fourth focus: the growing funder commitment to address power dynamics in grantmaking practices.

Equity represents a priority.

When asked about the trends that hold the greatest potential for positive impact in the next five years, 2023 survey respondents most frequently cited topics related to diversity, equity and inclusion. "We believe that funding for systemwide equity work—identifying, uprooting, and addressing systemic bias, racism and inequities in public schools—is the most important work we fund," one respondent said. In fact, nearly all respondents (93%) indicated a focus on one or more historically underserved populations in their funding, compared to 71% in the 2018 survey. More than two-thirds of respondents (68%) reported actively investing in education equity. That said, definitions of equity range from culturally responsive practice to systems change.

A focus on racial equity, including an intentional focus on using race or ethnicity as a lens in grantmaking decisions, appears to be on the rise. In the 2018 benchmarking survey, 42% of respondents indicated that they focused their funding on specific populations based on race/ethnicity; this year 52% reported doing so. This tracks an increase in the number of funders who made pledges to move more funds to Black and brown communities and leadership as part of their response to COVID-19 health disparities and the murder of George Floyd and others in 2020. This funding shift is supported by our 2022 research *New Trends in Philanthropy to Support Racial Equity and Learners of Color*, which found that 72% of Grantmakers for Education members showed evidence of using a racial equity lens in their grantmaking.

Many equity-focused funders are committed to addressing systemic resource inequities in the educational system, whether along racial/ethnic, urban/rural, socioeconomic or other divides, but funding distribution is only one aspect of equity. Respondents referenced many equity-related goals. One mentioned supporting "training/professional development capitalizing on the momentum of the national conversation around [how] racial equity could transform how we teach young people of color." Another listed "deepening the conversation and commitment about equity, even in places where that word can't be used."

Supporting their growing focus on equity, more education funders have adopted written policies on diversity, equity and inclusion for their organizations. Close to half of 2023 respondents (46%) implemented these policies for applicants or grantee staff, boards, and/or populations served, compared to 33% in 2018. One respondent described "creating and implementing a DEIJ strategic plan that cuts across internal operations and how we work with grantees/partners."

The commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives has been slower to reach organization boards. Not quite one-third of respondents (32%) said they had a written policy for their own boards, compared to 28% in 2018.

Stone Foundation Seeks Racial Equity Through Shared Power and Accountability*

For the philanthropic sector to advance racial equity in a meaningful and lasting way, funders must be willing to share agenda-setting authority with their grantees, learn alongside them and hold themselves equally accountable for achieving social change. These are among key lessons learned by the Chicago, Illinois-based W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation through an annual racial equity-focused learning event it hosts in collaboration with its grantees.

From 2009 through 2016, the Stone Foundation hosted separate annual grantee convenings in each of its three areas of focus—early childhood, K-12 and youth development—concentrating primarily on leadership development. Under the guidance of new leadership, in 2017 the foundation decided to combine these convenings and focus on racial equity both within the education and philanthropic sectors.

"We as funders set very big goals for our grantee organizations to achieve, but we somehow don't account for the underlying root causes that created the problems that got us to where we are today," observed Stone Foundation executive director Sara Slaughter. "Racial inequity feels…like a very big root cause of our challenges in education—and we need to better understand how organizations built on wealth and privilege are either contributing to inequity or combating it."

The initial combined grantee convening employed a common approach, with the foundation hiring a knowledgeable facilitator and securing an expert speaker. According to Slaughter, this first convening "sparked reflection on who funders choose to anoint as 'experts'…and we came away with a deeper recognition that our grantees were also experts who had valuable knowledge and lived experiences related to many of the same issues [the speaker] talked about."

For subsequent convenings, the Stone Foundation initiated a collaborative process that engages grantees in the design and content of the convenings, including choosing topics, planning agendas and recruiting or serving as speakers. This ensures that convenings focus on racial equity in ways salient to the daily work of these organizations. The foundation also retained a facilitator experienced in both education and equity, which has been critical to the success of this process. The facilitator engages with an advisory committee consisting of grantee leaders, as well as foundation staff.

Of equal importance has been the Stone Foundation's ensuring that the convenings are a non-competitive space that prioritizes shared learning, openness and vulnerability, rather than grantees feeling pressure to make the case for continued funding. Foundation staff are genuinely committed to humility and learning alongside grantees, which contributes to a sense of safety among grantees. In addition, the Stone Foundation provides small, flexible grants to grantees to consider how best to operationalize equity within their organizations.

The Stone Foundation intentionally avoids asking grantee participants to identify specific lessons learned or next steps. Slaughter commented, "We wanted to give them the space to think about equity as a verb, and how it applies to their own leadership, learning and networking."

Embracing the complexity of social change work and resisting overreliance on measurable, clear results within defined outcomes may be a fundamental part of the work of making progress on racial equity. Slaughter concluded, "We are working…side-by-side on solving these problems, and [grantees are] not the only accountable partner in creating the change."

While support for these initiatives has grown among education funders overall, at least one funder worried that this commitment may be slipping: "Our grantees are reporting that the uptick in funding during the first two years of Covid [sic] is beginning to drop," they said, "and they're struggling to maintain the programs they've built." Additional research would be needed to determine whether a growing number of education funders will maintain or build on their increased commitment to equity and racial justice, or instead revert to pre-2020 funding patterns.

Public policy is still important, although local contexts appear less favorable.
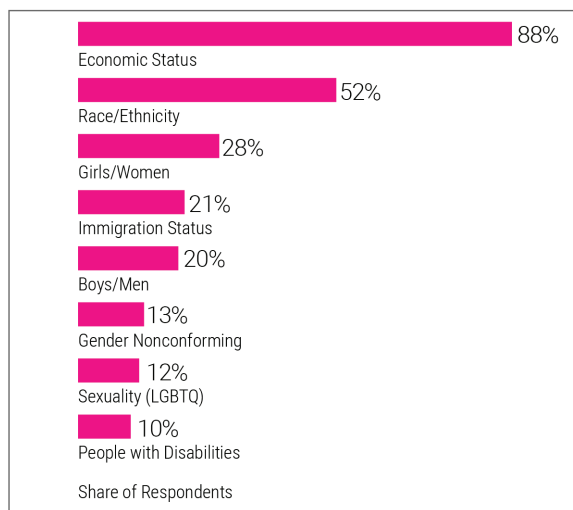
More than half of respondents (55%) support public policy and advocacy as part of their field-building strategy (see Appendix B), a portion comparable to the 53% of 2018 respondents who were supporting efforts to engage the public, build public will and advocate and inform public policy. As one respondent said, "Our funding of advocacy and policy work will have the greatest potential for improving educational access." Given respondents' concern over the politicization of education, policy efforts at the state and local level may have a focus on defensive plays. One

funder mentioned "using our policy and advocacy efforts at the state level to fight."

Among those supporting public policy and advocacy-related efforts, many respondents are targeting more equitable distribution of educational resources. "We are planning on focusing more on policy change to address funding inequities over the next two years," one noted. Asked about priorities, another funder noted, enthusiastically, "POLICY REFORM! Equity and access MUST begin with systemic/structural reforms at the policy level." Given how education resources are allocated, most of this policy work will need to happen at the state level. Close to three out of five 2023 respondents (59%) reported at least a moderately favorable policy environment at the state level, up from 54% in 2018.

The policy environment seems to be improving at the federal level in 2023. In the 2018 survey, midway through the Trump presidency, no respondents considered the federal environment to be very favorable, and just 17% considered it moderately favorable. In fact, federal education leadership was ranked as the top negative trend for education over the next five years. By comparison, close to half of 2023 respondents believed the federal policy environment to be either very favorable (6%) or moderately

Population Focus of Education Funding

- Economic Status — 88%
- Race/Ethnicity — 52%
- Girls/Women — 28%
- Immigration Status — 21%
- Boys/Men — 20%
- Gender Nonconforming — 13%
- Sexuality (LGBTQ) — 12%
- People with Disabilities — 10%

Share of Respondents

Actively Invest in Educational Equity

Yes	No	Don't Know	No Response
68%	9%	2%	26%
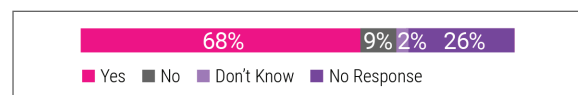
Funders Report Having Written DEI Policies On:

	Yes	No	Don't Know	No Response
Applicant and/or grantee staff, boards and/or populations served	46%	25%	8%	28%
Your foundation's staff	46%	25%	6%	29%
Your foundation's populations served	43%	23%	11%	30%
Your foundation's board	32%	32%	12%	33%
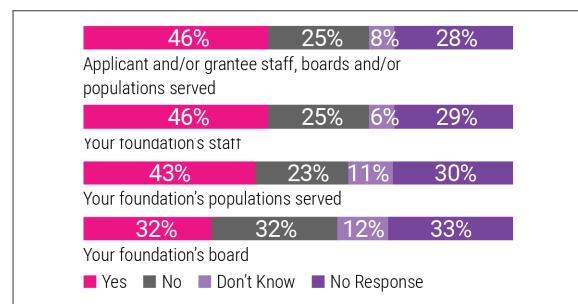
favorable (41%) to their current priorities. At the same time, a divided Congress will likely limit how much the federal government can advance significant educational initiatives.

The local education policy environment appears to have become less favorable since 2018. While more than half of respondents consider the local policy environment to be at least moderately favorable to their organizations' current priorities, the share considering the policy environment to be very favorable dropped from 23% to 7%. Multiple factors may be influencing this trend, but the politicization of education at the local level has undoubtedly contributed. To counter this trend, one respondent reported "giving grants to local organizations or community foundations to address anti-equity or anti-CRT organizations (far-right) pushing conversations."

Finally, a few respondents addressed the role of students and families in developing approaches to policy. One said that policy-related efforts must "[center] voices most proximate to the issues in the design and policy work related to system reform." This view seems to align with a rising commitment to student voice and advocacy, and adapting practices that disrupt traditional power dynamics in philanthropy.

Collaboration remains strong, although minimal funding is aligned.

Since EdFunders began benchmarking education funder priorities in 2008, at least 90% of respondents in each survey have reported participating in some type of formal collaborative effort. In 2023, 91% reported some type of collaborative activity, matching the share in 2018. Of the types of collaborative engagement tracked in the survey, respondents were most likely to belong to funder learning networks (74%) and/or affinity groups (66%).

Respondents cited a range of rationales for their collaborative efforts. For smaller, local grantmakers, leveraging resources was paramount. "We are not big enough to effect systems-level [change] on our own,"

Favorability of Policy Environment to Supporting Education Policies Consistent with Your Organization's Current Priorities

Federal

6% Very Favorable
21% No Opinion
7% Very Unfavorable
25% Moderately Unfavorable
41% Moderately Favorable

State

12% Very Favorable
13% No Opinion
9% Very Unfavorable
18% Moderately Unfavorable
47% Moderately Favorable

Local

7% Very Favorable
15% No Opinion
6% Very Unfavorable
21% Moderately Unfavorable
51% Moderately Favorable
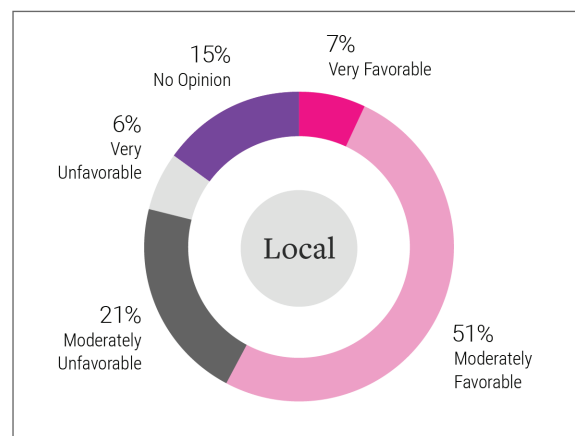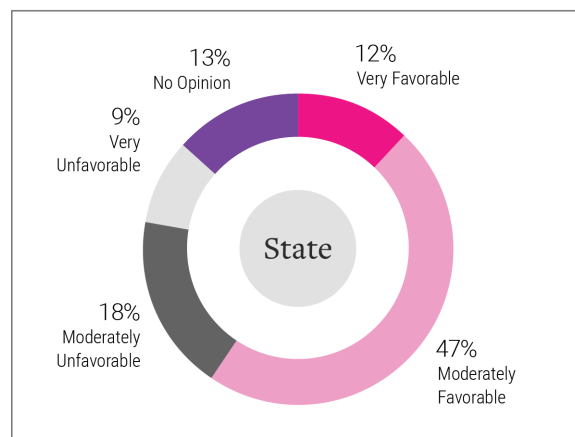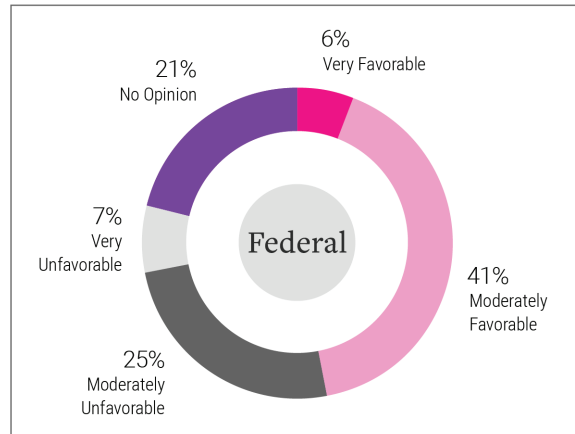
one said. "Collaboration and partnership increase resources and capacity, accelerate learning, and garner more attention for the issues." Another noted that "We say that all of our priorities require collaboration and co-funding, because the problems we seek to address...exceed our resources." These collaborations can also leverage other types of impact. For larger national funders, collaborations may help to ensure a lasting impact: "We...require collaboration with local funders to support work after we leave communities."

Collaboration can also be an avenue to public-policy related activities. "It's helpful to collaborate with larger foundations that have more political power and statewide presence," one respondent said. At the same time, larger funders also benefit from this type of collaboration. "We are particularly interested in co-funding policy work," reported a member of a larger organization, "to avoid exposure or the appearance of undue influence."

For the first time, a majority of respondents (54%) also indicated that their organizations had pooled funding in the prior year. Pooled funding generally requires deeper and more consistent engagement by funders than other forms of collaboration.[1] The ongoing funder response to the pandemic may have contributed to

this increase, as grantmakers joined together to respond to the crisis. One respondent noted that their organization "collaborated with other funders by creating one community-wide application that all funders considered collectively and worked to fund together." Another described being part of a pooled fund that targeted "community hubs to support in-person learning for students with working families."

Despite this commitment, coordinated funding generally represented a modest share of overall support--less than 5% of total education funding for a majority (53%) of organizations.

Education funders are exploring approaches to address power dynamics.

The 2023 survey asked for the first time whether respondents are currently engaging in or exploring grantmaking practices that are more responsive to grantee partner and community needs (e.g. trust-based philanthropy, participatory grantmaking and other types of philanthropy that are inclusive of grantee voice and attentive to power relationships). About half of overall respondents (49%) answered affirmatively, describing a range of approaches such as "working to reduce our application process, moving

Education-Related Formal Collaborative Efforts During the Past Year

Category	Share of Respondents
Learning Networks/Shared Learning	74%
Affinity Group Participation	66%
Pooled Funding	54%
Strategic Alignments/Aligned Grantmaking	44%
No Engagement in Past Year	9%

Share of Respondents
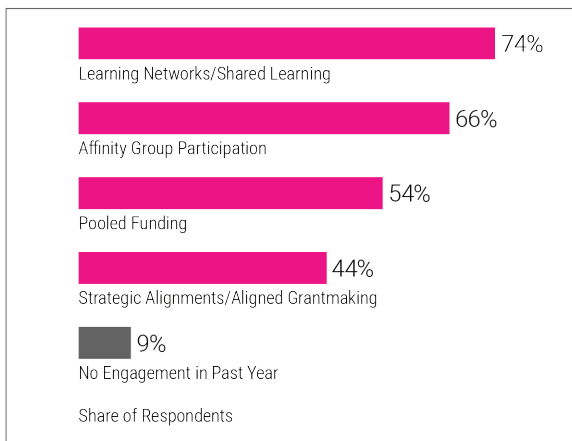
Share of Education Funding Representing Aligned and/or Pooled Funding in the Past Year

Category	Share of Respondents
75% or more	3%
50% to less than 75%	5%
25% to less than 50%	11%
10% to less than 25%	12%
5% to less than 10%	15%
Less than 5%	53%

Share of Respondents
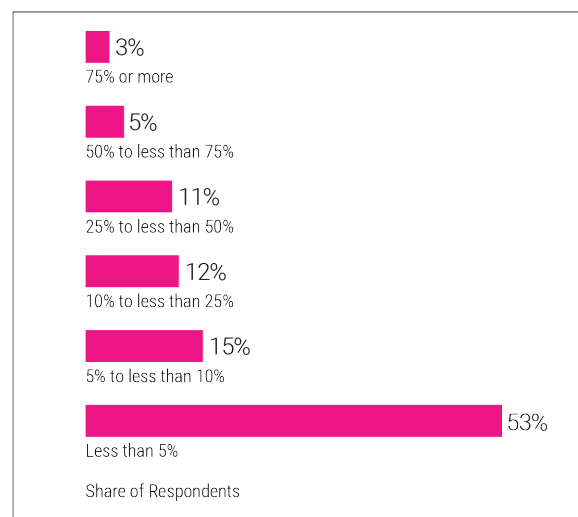
our reporting to discussions versus written reports, and engaging the community in the grant review process"; "collecting metrics [based] on how grantees track their data instead of using our metrics"; and hosting "open office hours once a month to promote transparency and access to disrupt traditional power imbalances." A few funders said they had been committed to more responsive grantmaking practices for some time. "We generally employed trust-based philanthropy principles before the term was coined," one said, while another described their organization moving "more toward trust-based and participatory grantmaking without ever identifying either as a strategic or tactical goal."

Whether or not responsive practices are part of their ongoing grantmaking, many funders adopted aspects of this approach in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing for more flexible application and reporting requirements, repurposing funds to general operating support, creating special funding initiatives or supporting pooled funds. Some have incorporated aspects of their pandemic response into their ongoing approach, while others have returned to pre-pandemic practices.

A few respondents to the 2023 survey foresee traditional philanthropic approaches having a negative impact on education over the next five years. One cited a need for greater funder alignment and collaboration, without which grantees get "pulled in different directions" by competing funder requirements. Another referenced a "tendency of larger funders to fund for shorter durations (less than 15 years) on initiatives that need consistent funding for long-term, sustainable change." A third simply cited "philanthropy doing the same things it has done for years...throwing good money after bad."

3 Trends in Education Giving

This year's survey continued the prior year's focus on four categories of education grantmaking: early learning, K-12 education, postsecondary education and workforce/career pathways, and education initiatives that extend beyond school walls. The following sections highlight overall findings and document key issues identified by respondents.

Early Learning

OUTLOOK

Funders have increased their focus on early learning in recent years, and support will continue to grow in coming years. Nonetheless, grant dollars for early learning will remain modest relative to other education priorities.

EARLY LEARNING DRAWS MORE ATTENTION, BUT NOT A MARKED INCREASE OVERALL

Almost half of respondents (47%) provide support for early learning, compared to one-third (33%) in the 2018 survey. "The research is clear on how access…to the necessary resources from birth to five can begin to shape and inform future outcomes for students," one said. Early learning was frequently cited as one of the main prospects for positive long-term impact. "Our early learning and family wellness initiative may prove to have the greatest impact," a respondent wrote. "By strengthening families, reducing barriers and increasing skills, more students will be better prepared not only for school but to navigate life."

Current funding levels do not match this level of interest, however. While about half of respondents (49%) who currently support early learning anticipate increasing their funding over the next two years, early

learning represents only 3% of education giving by respondents overall. This is down from 4% in the 2018 survey, despite the sharp declines in preschool enrollment at the height of the pandemic,[2] because, as one respondent noted, "preschools didn't get any of the federal funds." The same respondent noted overall decreases in the early learning workforce that may threaten the sector's viability. "Center-based preschools are losing staff rapidly to public schools that are rolling out transitional kindergarten, [which are different things]."

In every benchmarking survey, respondents have focused on the importance of high-quality early learning opportunities for our youngest learners; however, support for early childhood education

2023 Funding for Early Learning

- 47% Share of Respondents
- 3% Share of Grant Dollars
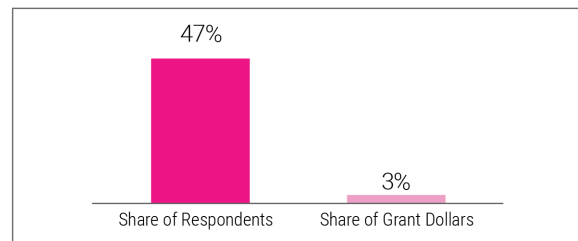
Anticipated Change in Early Learning Funding Over the Next Two Years

- 4% Decrease
- 48% Remain about the same
- 49% Increase
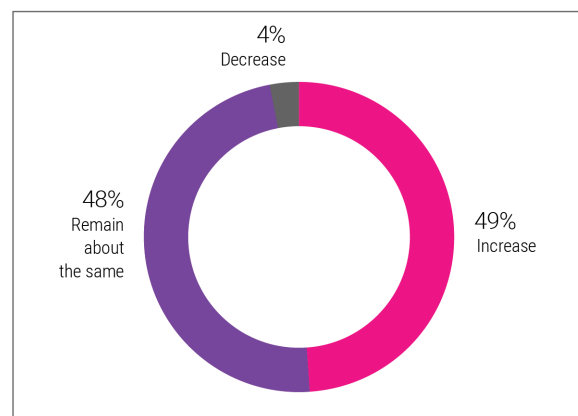
Trust for Learning Advances Ideal Learning Environments

For Trust for Learning, a philanthropic partnership, the goal is for all early learners, birth-eight, to benefit from the types of responsive, whole learner approaches offered by Montessori, Reggio Emilia and similar pedagogical models. The Trust pursues this goal through a commitment to nine principles of "ideal learning environments," which "are closely aligned with developmental neuroscience research as well as studies of practice and program implementation."[1] First among these principles is that "decision-making reflects a commitment to equity," and the Trust supports ideal learning environments in publicly-funded centers serving aspiring learners who have been historically underserved.

Based on more than a decade of experience, the Trust has recently adopted a three-pronged theory of change to advance ideal learning environments. The elements of this approach center young children, families and educators and emphasize complementary strategies, including direct investments in Head Start and other publicly funded programs, equitable movement building and thought leadership.

According to Ellen Roche, chief media & philanthropy officer and co-director, Trust for Learning seeks to support Head Start leaders "who have a vision or are already moving in the direction of ideal learning environments but maybe haven't had the resources." Head Start is one of the Trust's five strategic priorities because it serves the nation's most under-resourced children and families. Grants from the Trust support educators who want to create ideal learning environments to do so.

Through support for a learning community of the Head Start leaders it currently funds, Trust for Learning is also helping to build an equitable national movement for transitioning Head Start programs into ideal learning environments. The Trust funds co-facilitators with expertise in Head Start to coordinate the community and will underwrite a first-ever in-person convening this year. Leaders participating in the learning community, who tend to be as diverse as the learners they support, have found the opportunity to connect and share experience and expertise to be especially valuable. "The Ideal Learning Head Start Network is a community of educators who embody pedagogical values and principles committed to sustaining and amplifying early childhood policies, practices and organizational structures. In this professional learning environment I am encouraged to be reflective, self-aware, responsive and curious," said Lenor Moreno-Lundholm, education director, Child-Parent Centers.

Finally, within the thought leadership component of its approach, Trust for Learning provides support for the Head Start programs it funds to amplify and disseminate their work. Trust staff also undertake and commission other forms of thought leadership to advance ideal learning environments. A recent policy resource funded by the Trust focuses explicitly on racial and socioeconomic integration in preschools,[2] which are "among our most segregated learning environments," said Roche. "This grew out of our relationship with the Manny Cantor Center in New York, which was running both Head Start and private pay early learning programs in the same facility and was able to realize a dream of combining them into a single ideal learning environment. This is the ideal way to work as funders learn from their colleagues leading these programs and amplify their work to change policy."

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[1] See *Evidence Brief: Ideal Learning Environments for Young Children* at https://trustforlearning.org/evidence-brief/; and *Measuring the Quality of Early Learning Environments: A guide to evaluating ideal learning environments for young children* at https://trustforlearning.org/resource/measuring-the-quality-of-early-learning-environments/.

[2] See *Strong Foundations: Promoting Diverse and Inclusive Preschool Settings* at https://hunt-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Strong-Foundations-Promoting-Diverse-and-Inclusive-Preschool-Settings-2022.pdf.

remains low. One funder stated that while government support "doesn't cover the needed costs, philanthropy hesitates to step in where government should be."

K-12 Education

OUTLOOK
Funders are showing strong support for educational system redesign and transformation. This support appears likely to continue growing in coming years.

OUTLOOK
School choice, including charter schools, continues to account for a notable share of education funding. But this priority does not appear to be attracting new support.

OUTLOOK
Following the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, funder support for remote learning will likely remain steady at best and could decline over the next several years.

THE SHIFT FROM CORE ACADEMICS TO A WHOLE LEARNER APPROACH CONTINUES

Academic learning loss has been the topic of a persistent media push for the past three years. Survey results show little evidence that this concern has brought funders back to core academic performance as the main driver of their giving. As covered in the section on big picture trends, investment is strong in social and emotional learning and/or mental health and trauma-informed care, as well as wraparound social service supports for children and families.

While the focus on whole learner supports and relationships increases, support for remote learning appears to be leveling off as the pandemic subsides. While remote learning support may remain steady at best over the next several years, it is likely to decline over time in terms of an educational improvement strategy. "We need to pay attention to community

building because students need more than just technical content," observed one respondent. "Relationships are crucial." concluded another. A third voiced, "We believe the single most important element in a young person's life is often the consistent presence of a caring adult and programs that nurture those supportive relationships between adults and young people are the most successful." They continued, "We believe that the hours after school, on weekends and during the summer are critical times for growth, learning and change."

FUNDERS EMPHASIZE SYSTEMS CHANGE WHILE CONTINUING DISCRETE INITIATIVES

As noted in Chapter 1, survey respondents showed strong support for a fundamental rethinking of the U.S. education system, with 68% reporting a focus on redesign/transformation, more than all other priorities in the survey. That said, most of the current support from respondents' organizations is aimed at incremental change, such as teacher training, leadership development, STEM, and literacy/reading skills. At the same time, a couple of respondents cited broader challenges, noting that philanthropy often follows government priorities instead of advancing more innovative agendas and there being "too much personnel turnover [in the public school system] to make systemic change."

Respondents focused on redesign also seem to feel that school-based reforms hold less promise for the kinds of radical change necessary to alter young people's learning experience. Perhaps for this reason, while the issue of school choice, including charter schools, continues to account for a notable share of education funding, this priority does not appear to be attracting new support.

A MAJORITY SUPPORT TEACHER PREPARATION AND DEVELOPMENT

A shortage of qualified teachers ranked third among trends respondents predict will be damaging in the next five years. Respondents are concerned about

Hewlett Foundation Advances K-12 Teaching and Learning Transformation Through a Collaborative Place-Based Approach,

In 2020, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation conducted a refresh of its multi-year Deeper Learning strategy, which emphasizes the need the for 21st century learners to be critical thinkers and complex problem solvers, work collaboratively, and communicate effectively, among other competencies. The foundation had shown that schools were capable of implementing this approach. But a question remained as to whether educational systems could transform to make this approach universal for all learners.

To explore this question, Hewlett's renamed K-12 Teaching and Learning strategy adopted a collaborative place-based approach focused on six school districts. While national in focus, the foundation developed this strategy based on a belief that "by working in specific public school systems in diverse locations across the country, localized efforts could collectively help the nation better understand how to advance deeper learning at scale."[1] In its first three years, the refreshed strategy has already yielded valuable insights into how a national funder can partner in place effectively to advance its programmatic objectives.

In seeking to engage directly with school districts, the initial challenge the Hewlett Foundation faced was building trust. But the issue was not for the foundation to trust the school districts, it was for the school districts to trust the foundation. According to Program Director of Education Kent McGuire, "It's been a journey to get our school district partners to believe who we are and how we work there. When the bulk of your experience with funders is that we give you money if you agree to do 'X,' we support you if you agree to work with 'Y,' and we make grants to you if you can produce 'Z,' we can't expect them to believe us when we tell them that's not who we are. Until they have that trust, it impacts how we can work with them and how they respond to the overtures we make."

Hewlett has addressed this through a philosophy of building "great relationships," which started with creating an education team committed to cultivating and nurturing relationships. As former program officer and current Chief of Equity and Culture Charmaine Mercer noted, "We are all extremely relational people, and that is the collateral we trade in. That is how we even got in the door to be in partnership with school districts." Beyond relational skills, it has also been essential to "turn our assumptions and biases into questions and curiosities," according to McGuire.

The Hewlett Foundation's trust building also benefited indirectly from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with the launch of the K-12 Teaching and Learning strategy. In the uncertainty of 2020, the foundation vastly simplified the grantee application process and offered consulting support, demonstrating a commitment to and trust in the districts. "Those early moves were worth their weight in gold in terms of what we are able to ask the school districts to commit to and what they're willing to do," concluded McGuire.

Once a relationship with a school district was established, the critical next step was to collaborate in establishing shared priorities. Hewlett has needed to accept that these may not be what it considers the points of highest leverage or greatest potential impact. But as McGuire observed, "These are the things we can all agree are in the neighborhood of something called 'deeper learning.'" Without this shared agreement, "we spend our time talking about why you're not doing it in the way that I thought it would be done," rather than focusing on how to best support a district's efforts.

Ultimately, partnering in place with local school districts to advance educational transformation has meant the Hewlett Foundation has had to rethink its way of engaging with these grantees. "All we control is how we're in relationship to these places and our ability to think together with them about how to meet challenges head on as they surface," said McGuire. But taking a more traditional approach and staying out of this system "where big decisions are made about what happens to kids" would leave the foundation "a bystander." In working directly with school systems, Hewlett is better understanding the "how" of deeper learning, as "it's in their success that you learn."

[1] See Otto, R., *Poised for the Unknown: A Responsive Grantmaking Strategy for Teaching and Learning*, Case Study No. 19: Principles for Effective Grantmaking, Grantmakers for Education, October 2020.

teachers leaving the profession during the pandemic and the difficulty of finding new educators and paraeducators. These issues have highlighted a need for better teacher preparation and development. Respondents attributed the decline of the teacher work force largely to low wages, job stress, inadequate training and lack of community respect.

In the latest survey, just over three out of five respondents (61%) indicated support for teacher preparation and development, but this area constituted only 2% of overall education giving. Nonetheless, 40% planned to increase their funding in this area over the next two years. One respondent said, "Support for teacher preparation and professional development has the longest, widest impact on [education of] any issue area," while another noted that countering the teacher shortage will require "good wages" and lifting up "educator jobs in school and in the community as quality, empowering jobs."

PUBLIC SCHOOL FINANCING RECEIVES MODEST SUPPORT RELATIVE TO CONCERNS

Public school financing ranked second among the trends predicted to be most harmful over the next five years, after the politicization of education. The ranking was consistent with 2018 findings. Respondents cited challenges ranging from a potential economic downturn to the loss of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to a "scarcity mindset during difficult times" and a general "public will to underfund education." Yet, while most respondents fund some aspect of K-12 education, only about a third (35%) focus on public school financing, and their giving accounts for 3% of overall education funding.

CHANGES IN PEDAGOGY AND CURRICULUM PROMPT BOTH OPTIMISM AND CONCERN

Pedagogy and curriculum were among the factors most likely to have a positive impact in the next five years—and among those most likely to result in a

negative impact. On the positive side, respondents cited "growing support for experiential education, project-based learning," "evidence-based literacy approaches…that [show] almost all students can learn to read with proper instruction," "hybrid learning models" and "equity infused curricula [that] will change the way our students are educated and see themselves changing the world."

Other trends in pedagogy aroused concern. One respondent cited a prevailing focus on early literacy "without defining what that means…Some will misunderstand the problems; others simply won't understand them at all. But billions will be spent on curricula and training that teachers don't really use." Others cited the "urgency to boost literacy…as defined by standardized tests" and a "lack of fact-based methods used to teach reading."

Current pedagogy and curriculum can also impede equity, funders pointed out, with one noting a "lack of support for disenfranchised [learners] to embrace alternative education," and another a "lack of focus on DEI…We must build programs, systems and campuses that support today's students and not the students of the past." Another respondent noted that "the hardest area to change is curriculum and pedagogy because the standards have been set, yet they don't meet the needs of all learners. Educators need time to change their curriculum [but] funding is usually non-existent."

TECHNOLOGY TRIGGERS POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE RESPONSES

Technology was already deeply integrated into K-12 education by the time the pandemic arrived. When asked to identify the factors or trends thought to have the greatest potential for a positive or negative impact on education in 2018, slightly more than 50% of respondents identified the use of technology in the classroom as having a negative impact. That year, technology was listed as seventh in the list of trends with potential negative impact. Respondents identified the benefits of a focus on computer science, creative

2023 Funding for K-12 Education

Category	Share of Respondents	Share of Grant Dollars
Educational System Redesign/Transformation	68%	7%
Leadership	63%	6%
Teacher Preparation and Development	61%	2%
Curriculum and Pedagogy	56%	3%
Literacy/Reading Skills	53%	2%
Multilingual Learners	50%	1%
New School Models/Designs	48%	1%
STEM (Science/Technology/Engineering/Math)	45%	5%
Data Systems	45%	2%
Civic Engagement/Civics Education	39%	0.4%
Narrative Change	38%	2%
Public School Finance/Resource Inequities	35%	3%
Special Needs Education	34%	2%
Use of Technology in the Classroom	33%	0.2%
Tutoring	29%	3%
Standards/Assessments	28%	1%
Remote/Online/Hybrid Learning	28%	0.3%
School Turnaround/Low-Performing Schools	26%	0.1%
School Choice (including Charter Schools)	25%	7%

■ Share of Respondents
■ Share of Grant Dollars

Anticipated Change in K-12 Education Funding Over the Next Two Years

Category	Increase	Remain About the Same	Decrease
Educational System Redesign/Transformation	44%	52%	4%
Teacher Preparation and Development	40%	55%	6%
Narrative Change	35%	63%	2%
Civic Engagement/Civics Education	35%	56%	9%
Public School Finance/Resource Inequities	33%	65%	2%
Literacy/Reading Skills	33%	61%	5%
STEM (Science/Technology/Engineering/Math)	31%	64%	5%
Data Systems	30%	64%	6%
Tutoring	29%	66%	5%
Curriculum and Pedagogy	29%	62%	9%
Leadership	28%	66%	6%
Use of Technology in the Classroom	26%	70%	4%
Standards/Assessments	26%	72%	3%
New School Models/Designs	25%	60%	15%
School Turnaround/Low-Performing Schools	22%	73%	5%
Multilingual Learners	21%	77%	1%
School Choice (including Charter Schools)	17%	71%	11%
Remote/Online/Hybrid Learning	15%	70%	15%
Special Needs Education	10%	85%	4%

■ Increase ■ Remain About the Same ■ Decrease

computing and digital literacy, but many cautioned on the need to weigh the benefits versus disadvantages of technology for young people.

A primary concern was the potential for undiscriminating use of technology—technology for the sake of it rather than for furthering meaningful educational outcomes. "[There's] an overreliance on AI/technology without human guidance," one funder said. "Relationships are crucial to understanding more than academic content." Another added that we need "attention to community building because students need more than technical content to enjoy life." In spite of these concerns, 52% of respondents in 2018 anticipated increasing investments in the use of technology in classrooms.

The concerns expressed in 2018 did not appear to spur much investment in trying to change how educators and the education system engage with technology. According to the 2023 survey, while one-third of respondents (33%) focus on the use of technology in the classroom, their support represents just 0.2% of overall education giving. Roughly one-quarter of respondents (28%) provide funding related to remote/online/hybrid learning, accounting for 0.3% of giving. One possible exception is digital literacy, which 30% of respondents support. This priority—which covers activities ranging from reading and writing in an electronic medium to gauging the accuracy of web content—represents 1% of overall education funding among respondents, and two-fifths of digital literacy funders anticipate increasing their giving for digital literacy in the next two years.

Concerns about technology appear to have grown as funders witnessed the challenges of leveraging technology during the pandemic to provide effective and equitable remote educational experiences, especially for younger learners. This year's respondents continued to be ambivalent about the impact of technology, which was ranked fifth among the trends respondents believed had the potential for negative impact over the next five years. Potential benefits focused around the potential of having

remote or tech-enabled learning options for students. One respondent also cited "digital literacy, citizenship and civic education" as potential benefits.

Those respondents with a less favorable view of technology's impact pointed at two different impacts of technology. First was inequitable access to technology or broadband, even as interest in hybrid schooling is increasing. "As we begin to shift our thinking about how and where we learn and work, inequitable access to technology and digital literacy means that certain populations will continue to be left behind," noted one respondent. This was of particular concern for students from underserved backgrounds and those in rural communities.

The second concern had to do with the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and its expanding presence in our daily lives. "Unless [artificial intelligence] is diligently programmed to be antiracist," one respondent said, "it has the potential to make sweeping changes that will simply reinforce the inequities of the current education system."

Postsecondary and Career Pathways

OUTLOOK
Postsecondary and career pathways are still a top priority for funders, and funding is likely to continue growing in the next few years.

COMMITMENT TO ENSURING STUDENT ACCESS TO EDUCATION BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL REMAINS STRONG

Two-thirds of respondents (66%) support postsecondary education and workforce/career pathways—matching the share reported in 2018. Respondents also placed improved postsecondary career pathways high on the list of top trends that would positively impact education over the next five years. As one put it, "'Tipping point' data demonstrate the significant impact of postsecondary pathways on earnings and other quality-of-life outcomes."

Within this area of funding, the single largest share of respondents (58%) fund postsecondary access for historically marginalized students, and more than two-fifths of these respondents (43%) anticipate increasing their funding for this priority over the next two years. One respondent characterized their organization as supporting "collaborations and innovations that have the potential to transform the postsecondary ecosystem in service of more equitable outcomes for the learners of today and tomorrow." Funding for postsecondary access accounts for one in ten grant dollars (10%) overall.
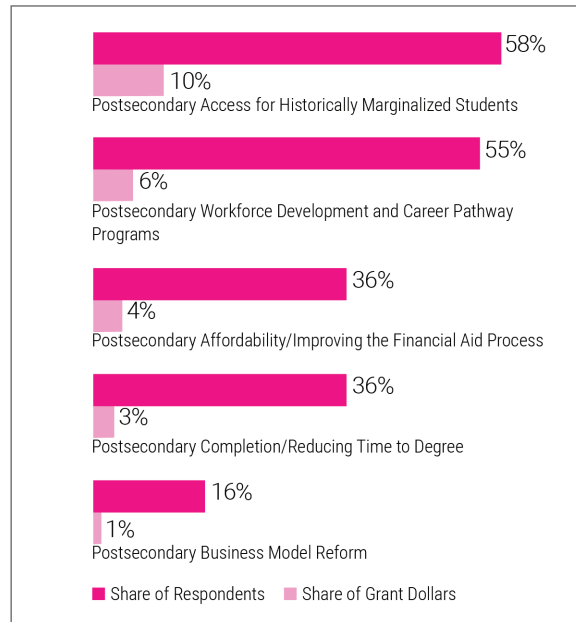
Supporting postsecondary education means helping learners to complete their degrees. Over one-third of respondents (36%) included a focus on postsecondary completion and/or reducing time to degree. "We launched a new initiative to enroll/re-engage students who did not enroll or dropped out of college in the last five years, especially impeded by pandemic-related impacts," one said. While much of this support focuses on individual higher educational institutions, another respondent described a more systems-oriented approach: "Our work to improve college attainment in cities has the potential to better link disparate systems within cities to help them realize the role they can and do play in effecting college completion."

Funders noted that affordability is an ever-present obstacle. "Trends show insufficient funds is the top reason students drop out of college," one said. To address this, some are supporting an increase in Pell grants, others are working to simplify the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application process.

CREATING ALTERNATE PATHWAYS TO CAREERS RANKS HIGH

In a marked shift from the Obama-era "college for all" priority, education funders appear to be increasing their focus on alternatives to traditional higher education. One respondent described, "expanding [high school] advising to include options beyond college." Another described supporting "streamlined transitions into postsecondary [life]…responsive to the reality that

2023 Funding for Postsecondary and Career Pathways

- 58% / 10% — Postsecondary Access for Historically Marginalized Students
- 55% / 6% — Postsecondary Workforce Development and Career Pathway Programs
- 36% / 4% — Postsecondary Affordability/Improving the Financial Aid Process
- 36% / 3% — Postsecondary Completion/Reducing Time to Degree
- 16% / 1% — Postsecondary Business Model Reform

■ Share of Respondents ■ Share of Grant Dollars

Anticipated Change in Postsecondary and Career Pathways Funding Over the Next Two Years

	Increase	Remain About the Same	Decrease
Postsecondary Access for Historically Marginalized Students	43%	55%	2%
Postsecondary Workforce Development and Career Pathway Programs	41%	56%	3%
Postsecondary Affordability/Improving the Financial Aid Process	39%	59%	2%
Postsecondary Business Model Re-form	32%	64%	5%
Postsecondary Completion/Reducing Time to Degree	29%	69%	2%

■ Increase ■ Remain About the Same ■ Decrease

Rodel Creates Pathways to Postsecondary Success in Delaware

Rodel has long supported postsecondary education. But it was the economic crisis in the early 2000s that led the foundation to take on a catalytic role in advancing postsecondary pathways. Concerns over the employment prospects of young Delawareans provided an impetus for considering how high school students could graduate with the skills needed to transition directly into well-paying jobs. At the same time, major employers in the state were raising concerns about their ability to find workers with appropriate skills. Seeing an opportunity to connect these concerns, Rodel engaged a coalition of partners to create Delaware Pathways, a model initiative for connecting high school learning to in-demand workforce opportunities in IT, healthcare, construction and manufacturing.

According to Rodel President and CEO Paul Herdman, its role in the establishment of Delaware Pathways was to "convene, connect and scale." The nonprofit began by hosting opportunities to engage Delaware's governor, local officials and other key stakeholders in identifying workforce needs and strategies for addressing those needs. Rodel staff also sought out opportunities to learn about the most successful career pathway initiatives globally, including programs in Switzerland, Germany and Singapore.

With a plan to create a career pathway program in place, Rodel then sought out opportunities to connect with local and national funding partners to co-invest in this initiative. Ultimately, Delaware Pathways launched in 2017 serving 27 high school students; by the 2021-2022 academic year, it had grown to serving 26,000 high schoolers. Reflecting this success, Rodel has provided support to scale these efforts by institutionalizing the Pathways approach in public policy.

Recently, Rodel and other partners in Delaware Pathways launched "Pathways 2.0," which will expand the program to middle schoolers with a goal of "creating equitable, strong supports and programming…to meaningfully connect exploration, learning and a positive self-image to occupations and their community."[1] By 2024, the program will engage 6,000 middle school students with career exploration, professional learning and advising and extended learning opportunities to connect in- and out-of-school experiences. The Pathways program will also deepen its work with high school students—increasing from 50% to 80% of high schoolers in the state—partner with more employers and "create new opportunities for adults in high growth sectors like IT and healthcare."[2]

As part of its efforts to increase connections between students and employers in the IT sector, Rodel has established the Tech Council of Delaware (https://techcouncilofdelaware.org/), which formally launched in 2023. Its goal is to make the state "a national leader in creating inclusive tech talent pipelines to ensure residents from underrepresented communities have access to high-wage employment," while "strengthening Delaware's tech ecosystem and making our state a leading tech hub."[3] The council provides a confidential space in which companies with tech jobs can provide candid intelligence on their workforce challenges and needs.

The Tech Council of Delaware can then utilize actual employer vacancies to convene businesses and educators in co-designing 'earn-and-learn' workforce programs that provide employers with the talent they desire while also offering residents a direct pathway to high-quality employment in a growing industry.

1 See https://rodelde.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Pathways-2022-Snapshot.pdf.

2 See https://rodelde.org/a-new-era-for-career-pathways-in-delaware/.

3 See https://techcouncilofdelaware.org/.

pushing a traditional college for all model is insufficient to ensure young people get the education and training they need to meet the demands of the future workforce." Or, more succinctly in the words of another: "The college degree is not paying off for everyone." One respondent noted that, "Career-connected learning addresses a number of [important] priorities—student voice, student engagement and career pathways."

Overall, more than half of respondents (55%) provide support for workforce development and career pathway programs. Two out of five of these respondents (41%) expect to increase related giving in the next two years. Among these funders priorities are "expanding [high school] advising to include options beyond college," "diversifying education funding to include more support for trades" and providing "short-term credentials/certificates that address employer needs [and] get people into the workforce quicker with the ability to earn and still learn as they go, as opposed to picking [between] work or school."

Funders emphasized that these career pathways will ideally be oriented toward stable financial futures. One described how their organization supports "increasing access to trainings that lead to jobs that provide better than the 'living wage,' which is barely livable in most large urban areas." Others emphasized that training should be affordable, and not weigh learners down with debt.

Beyond Classrooms and Schools

OUTLOOK
Funders are embracing the totality of learners' experiences, strengths and needs within the classroom and through out-of-school time, and support is likely to show strong increases going forward.

OUTLOOK
More funders see engaging student voice and supporting student advocacy as essential to systems transformation.

MOST SUPPORT MORE HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO LEARNING

As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, nearly all 2023 respondents (94%) provide funding oriented toward the whole learner, emphasizing the interaction of academic learning with social and emotional, behavioral and physical wellbeing. Respondents also ranked wraparound supports among the top priorities with the greatest potential for long-term impact in improving educational access and outcomes. "Wraparound supports…are the backbone of academic achievement," one respondent said.

Since the mid-2010s, education funders surveyed have been shifting attention toward the holistic social, emotional, family and community needs of diverse learners, in and out of school. In the latest survey, a respondent noted that "many of our education priorities focus on not just youth/children but also their families." For this respondent, taking a "holistic view of the challenge that youth have in being successful when non-academic factors in their lives are creating barriers crosses many of our investment areas."

It is unclear from the survey results how much this represents a transformational, systemic approach to change, versus discrete efforts operating within traditional systems. "Health, housing, parenting, etc. are driving educational outcomes far more than school quality, but we rarely address both school and home together," one respondent said. "This results in siloed efforts to address [non-school based factors] … apart from efforts to address curriculum or teacher quality or school leadership."

MENTAL HEALTH/TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE REPRESENTS A TOP PRIORITY

In 2023, 62% of funders report supporting mental health and trauma-informed care for learners in school-based or out-of-school settings. Close to half (46%) expect to increase their giving in this area over the next two years. While a number of funders have supported mental health interventions for learners over time, the COVID-19 pandemic heightened and highlighted the need in new ways.

One respondent characterized mental health support as a "basic need that is imperative to student success." This perspective is supported by respondents ranking mental health as one of the top trends that could positively impact education over the next five years.

Arts engagement has long been shown to improve mental health, as well as students' sense of engagement and belonging.[3] Yet, while about two out of five 2023 respondents (39%) fund arts education, only 15% of these respondents plan to increase funding over the next two years. As one respondent put it, arts education "may [be] overlooked with other more 'urgent' issues." Said another, "it's considered supplementary."

OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME REMAINS AN IMPORTANT FOCUS

During the acute phases of the pandemic, out-of-school time (OST) providers pivoted to virtual programming and provided other learning supports, such as access to digital resources. As in-person learning and programming returned, OST programs have been ramping up as a source of mentoring, enrichment services and recreational activities. Just over half of respondents to the latest benchmarking survey (54%) provide support for the OST sector, up from 24% in 2018. Their grantmaking accounts for one in ten education grant dollars (10%) awarded by respondents overall, and one-third of these respondents (33%) anticipate increasing their OST funding over the next two years. "I believe that out-of-school time learning holds great promise for learners," one respondent said. "We have not yet burdened the OST space with… inequitable practices that weigh down our formal education system. In the best OST learning environments, we center the child and provide access to hands-on learning that enables children to thrive and discover their potential. We don't need to reform OST; we need to protect it and invest in it."

INCREASED INVESTMENT APPEARS LIKELY IN ISSUES THAT INTERSECT EDUCATION AND OTHER SYSTEMS

Just over half (53%) of respondents are funding efforts aimed at the intersection of education, health, and juvenile justice among other systems. However, this funding accounts for only 1% of overall education support reported by respondents. "I don't think there is a great understanding of how education impacts other systems and vice versa," one respondent said. Forty-three percent of these funders said they will increase their support as time goes on. "We believe that identifying and addressing systemic barriers to education and workforce success is key to ensuring equitable outcomes for youth," one said. "As such, we feel the areas that have the greatest potential for impact are related to the intersections between education and other systems."

STUDENT VOICE AND ADVOCACY GROWS IN IMPORTANCE

A majority of respondents (57%) are funding efforts to include learners' perspectives in educational decision-making across in-school and out-of-school time. Almost half of these respondents (48%) anticipate increasing their support over the next two years. Their reasons differed, however. "Increasing our student voices so that they can tell their stories will be the most impactful way to help guide our funding priorities," one respondent said. Others wanted to include "those closest to the challenges in developing solutions," getting "better buy-in from students and parents" and disrupting the "'stuck' politics of public education." Another was skeptical about funders' overall commitment: "I think a lot of funders see this as a nice to have versus an essential first step to transformation."

2023 Funding Beyond Classrooms and Schools

Category	Share of Respondents	Share of Grant Dollars
Social and Emotional Learning (Non-Cognitive)	62%	2%
Mental Health/Trauma-Informed Care	62%	2%
Family/Community Engagement	60%	8%
Community Schools/Wraparound Supports (e.g., Social Workers, Counseling, etc.)	58%	1%
Student Voice/Advocacy	57%	4%
Out-of-School Time / Expanded Learning	54%	10%
Intersections Between Education and Other Systems (e.g., Health, Juvenile Justice)	53%	1%
Dropout Prevention/Disconnected Youth	48%	1%
Personalized Learning/Learner-Centered Learning	48%	3%
Arts Education	39%	3%
Use of Technology in the Classroom	33%	0.2%
Disciplinary Policy/Restorative Justice	31%	0.4%
Digital Literacy	30%	1%

■ Share of Respondents
■ Share of Grant Dollars

Anticipated Change in Funding Beyond Classrooms and Schools Over the Next Two Years

Category	Increase	Remain About the Same	Decrease
Student Voice/Advocacy	48%	49%	4%
Mental Health/Trauma-Informed Care	46%	52%	2%
Intersections Between Education and Other Systems (e.g., Health, Juvenile Justice)	43%	53%	4%
Disciplinary Policy/Restorative Justice	41%	52%	7%
Digital Literacy	40%	57%	2%
Community Schools/Wraparound Supports (e.g., Social Workers, Counseling, etc.)	39%	55%	6%
Family/Community Engagement	39%	59%	2%
Out-of-School Time /Expanded Learning	33%	58%	9%
Dropout Prevention/Disconnected Youth	31%	65%	4%
Personalized Learning/Learner-Centered Learning	27%	67%	6%
Use of Technology in the Classroom	26%	70%	4%
Social and Emotional Learning (Non-Cognitive)	25%	66%	9%
Arts Education	15%	75%	11%

■ Increase ■ Remain About the Same ■ Decrease

4 Looking Ahead: Critical Questions Shaping the Future of Education

Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2018-19 posited that, "The field of education philanthropy is at an inflection point." Among the key predictions from the report that came to pass: grantmakers focused more investments on early learning and postsecondary pathways; and they shifted away from school turnaround and solely academic metrics and leaned into social and emotional learning, as well as more family and community engagement. Then the pandemic happened. Educational insti-tutions had very little room to implement reforms, as they pivoted to respond to the immediate needs of the crisis. At the same time, the crisis exacerbated inequities in a system that was already failing to meet the needs of many learners.

With this perspective in mind, Grantmakers for Education has chosen to highlight five critical questions for funders to consider as they reflect on their next steps in shaping the future of education:

1 Funders appear to agree on the need for an education system that can holistically and equitably serve learners and prepare them to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving world that is being profoundly shaped by technology. As of yet, there is no consensus about what the new system should look like or how to build it. **Can we articulate a shared vision for the learning experience we want our young people to have that does not artificially pit academic learning against the social, emotional and developmental needs of young people? If we can, what does this mean for the kinds of efforts funders need to support in both the short and long term? What does it mean for how funders work together and how they work with communities, young people and governmental agencies?**

2 The public education system is struggling to pivot quickly enough to respond to the changing needs of young people and communities. In part, this is because the existing infrastructure of public education is designed to perpetuate inequitable systems. **What kinds of aligned systems and policies are needed to support a more student-centered education system that reflects what we know about human development and the science of learning? What is needed to build the appetite and capacity of our sector to truly collaborate on a new public education infrastructure?**

3 Many states have passed or are considering limitations on the rights of historically marginalized students and the breadth of perspectives in curricula. **How can funders empower young people, families, communities and policymakers to protect the right all students have to receive an education that prepares them to be informed and full contributors to society?**

4 Different approaches to investing and collaborating require funders—as organizations and individuals —to work in different ways. **What can we learn from philanthropic work in other sectors and in the global ecosystem? How can we get boards, staff and grantees involved in the kinds of relationship-building, skills development and policy redesign that enable truly equitable grantmaking practice?**

5 The development of technology will continue to outpace our capacity to respond. **In light of technological advancements, how do we need to reconsider the mindsets, skills and knowledge that young people need to develop as part of their formal education? How can we use technology as a tool to create more human-centered, expansive learning opportunities that act in service of those needs? How do we roll out technology innovation in ways that prioritize equity?**

Education funders have long been an essential support to the American education system, and to the young people, families and communities it comprises. We hope that insights from this latest benchmarking report incite a level of urgency for working in partnership with each other and our communities to build a future where all learners can thrive in education systems that are equitable and just.

Endnotes

1. For more information on the opportunities and challenges of funder collaboration, see Jung, M., *Building Community from Crisis: A Collaborative Fund for the Out-of-School Time Field,* Grantmakers for Education, September 2022 available at https://www.edfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CaseStudyBuildingCommunity_09142022.pdf.

2. See National Center for Education Statistics, *Enrollment Rates of Young Children*, May 2022 update, at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cfa/enrollment-of-young-children; and U.S. Census Bureau, "School Enrollment Rises Slightly in 2021," December 2022 news release, at https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/school-enrollment.html#:~:text=Preschool%20Enrollment&text=Enrollment%20did%20not%20return%20to,to%204.3%20million%20in%202021.

3. See Stevenson, L., and S. Crowell, *Powerful Arts Education Practice, 2021* available at https://hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Powerful-Arts-Education-Practice-Report.pdf.

APPENDIX A:
Methodology

Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2023 provides timely analyses and insights on the current and future priorities of U.S. education funders. The findings in this report are based on survey responses representing 142 grantmaking organizations, 100 of which are members of Grantmakers for Education. EdFunders conducted this online-only survey from late-December 2022 through February 2023, and distributed it to 258 EdFunders members (39% response rate) and 409 other education funders identified by EdFunders (10% response rate).

Because respondents to the 2023 benchmarking survey account for only a small fraction of the thousands of U.S. foundation, corporate, and other private funders of education, and do not constitute a representative sample, findings may be suggestive of trends, but should not be considered conclusive.

Of the 142 organizations responding to the 2023 EdFunders benchmarking survey, 30 organizations (21%) also responded to the 2018 survey. Comparisons with earlier benchmarking studies are generally limited to broad trends, with occasional references to changes in shares of funders. As the size and composition of survey samples has changed with each study, distributions presented in each benchmarking study are, in general, not directly comparable.

RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Nearly two-thirds of 2023 benchmarking survey respondents (65%) identify as family or private/independent foundations. Compared to current Grantmakers for Education membership, respondents are more likely to be family foundations and less likely to be private/independent foundations.

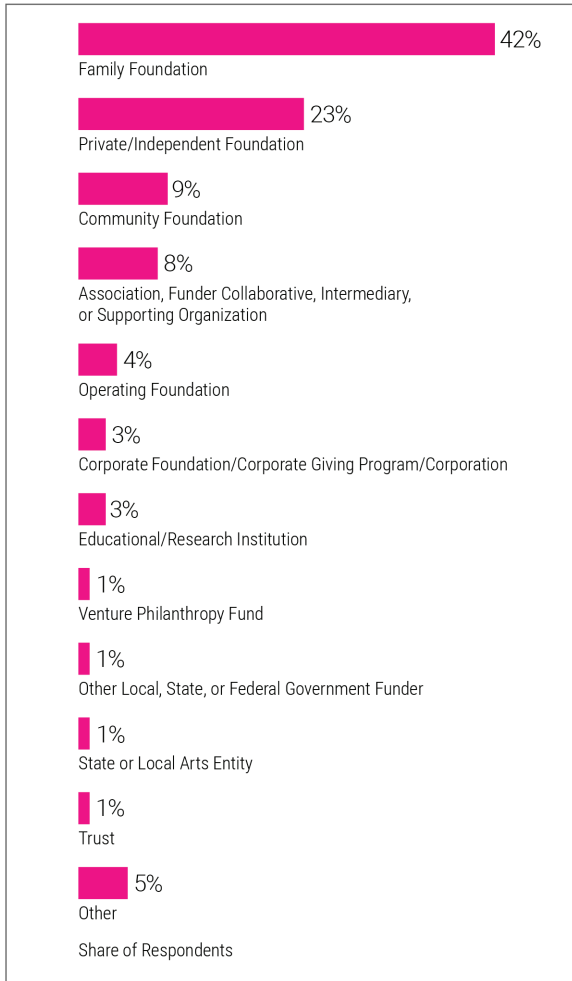A majority of respondents (57%) fund at the local level, while about two-fifths (39%) fund at the state and national level. Close to two-fifths of respondents (38%) explicitly fund in large, urban communities, while less than one-third (30%) focus on rural communities. By recipient focus, the largest share of respondents funds elementary/secondary educational institutions, followed by postsecondary educational institutions and early learning organizations.

The 91 respondents who included information on their grants budgets provided education funding totaling just over $1 billion in their latest fiscal year. Almost half of respondents (48%) gave 75% of their total funding for education-related priorities. The median amount awarded for education by EdFunders members was $4.0 million, compared to $3.6 million for non-member respondents.

ISSUE AREAS TRACKED

The 2023 benchmarking survey tracked education funding across 37 specific issue areas. Grantmakers for Education consolidated or dropped a few categories of funding included in the previous 2018 survey, reflecting the evolving priorities of education funders. EdFunders also added several issue areas to the 2023 survey to capture new and more nuanced directions in the field, including civic engagement/civics education; educational system redesign/transformation; mental health/trauma-informed care; narrative change; tutoring; postsecondary access for historically marginalized students; affordability/improving the financial aid process; completing/reducing time to degree completion; and higher education business model reform.

Type of Education Funder

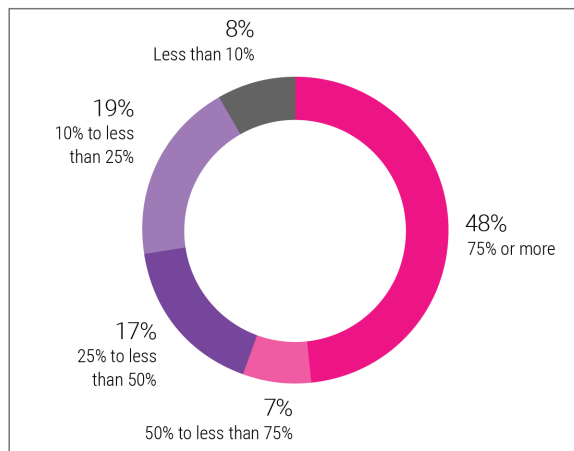- Family Foundation — 42%
- Private/Independent Foundation — 23%
- Community Foundation — 9%
- Association, Funder Collaborative, Intermediary, or Supporting Organization — 8%
- Operating Foundation — 4%
- Corporate Foundation/Corporate Giving Program/Corporation — 3%
- Educational/Research Institution — 3%
- Venture Philanthropy Fund — 1%
- Other Local, State, or Federal Government Funder — 1%
- State or Local Arts Entity — 1%
- Trust — 1%
- Other — 5%

Share of Respondents

Community Focus of Education Funding

- Large Urban Communities — 38%
- Rural Communities — 30%
- Small to Mid-Size Urban Communities — 28%
- Suburban Communities — 18%
- Not Applicable — 44%

Share of Respondents
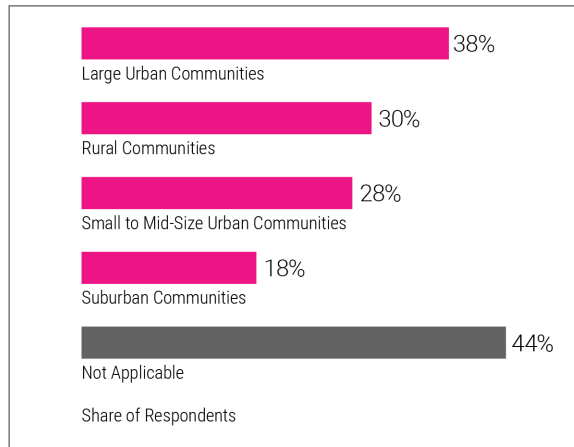
Share of Total Grants Budget Supporting Education

- 8% — Less than 10%
- 19% — 10% to less than 25%
- 48% — 75% or more
- 17% — 25% to less than 50%
- 7% — 50% to less than 75%

Geographic Focus of Education Funding

- Local — 57%
- State — 39%
- National — 39%
- Multi-State or Regional — 24%
- International — 8%

Share of Respondents
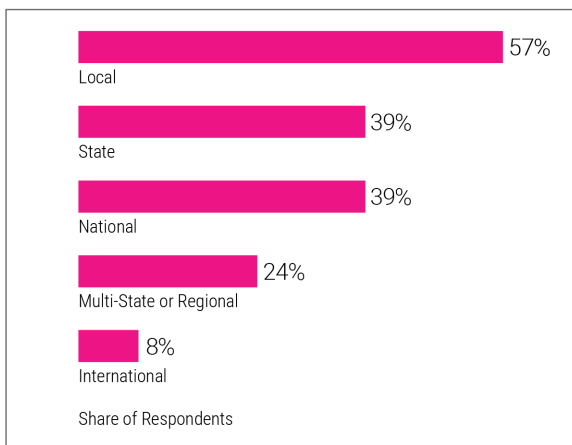
Education Funders' Field-Building Strategies

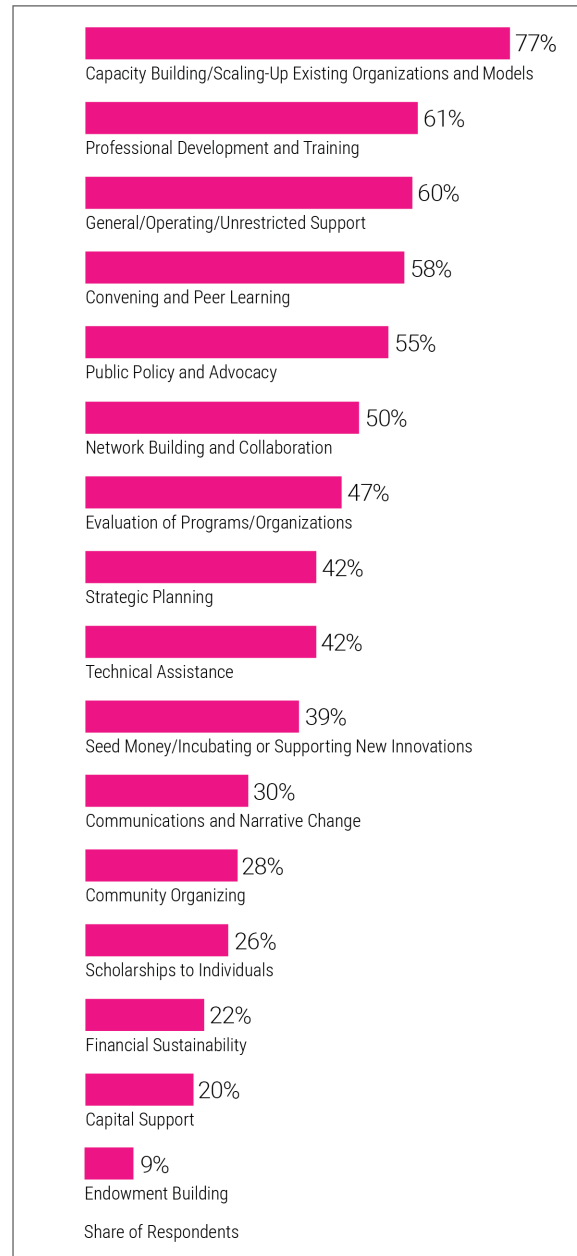As in the 2018 benchmarking survey, many 2023 respondents are investing in helping institutions to grow and scale-up successful models (77%) and in supporting professional development and training for teachers, school leaders and other education professionals (61%). In contrast, well over half of respondents to the 2023 survey (55%) report providing support for public policy and advocacy, compared to 36% in the 2018 survey. The share of funders providing general/operating/unrestricted support and funding for financial sustainability were also higher, although the differences there were modest.

Strategy Focus of Education Funding

Strategy	Share of Respondents
Capacity Building/Scaling-Up Existing Organizations and Models	77%
Professional Development and Training	61%
General/Operating/Unrestricted Support	60%
Convening and Peer Learning	58%
Public Policy and Advocacy	55%
Network Building and Collaboration	50%
Evaluation of Programs/Organizations	47%
Strategic Planning	42%
Technical Assistance	42%
Seed Money/Incubating or Supporting New Innovations	39%
Communications and Narrative Change	30%
Community Organizing	28%
Scholarships to Individuals	26%
Financial Sustainability	22%
Capital Support	20%
Endowment Building	9%

Share of Respondents

Grantmakers
FOR EDUCATION

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Grantmakers for Education is the nation's largest community of education philanthropists. EdFunders members make up a diverse network of almost 300 public, private and community foundations, and others, that support public education. Working in partnership with our members, we pursue systemic approaches to equity and racial justice in education in order to make a positive impact on learners everywhere. We are a hub for new connections and ideas, a compass to help members navigate their work, a spur for collective action and a champion for positive change in education. For more information or to learn about membership, please contact us at information@edfunders.org.