

# Becoming a Learning Organization:

## PropelNext California 2018 Cohort

### Final Learning and Evaluation Report

### Executive Summary

January 2019

**“It’s like you’re sling-shotted into a level of sophistication with an entirely new language. You don’t speak English anymore. You speak Propel.”**

– Leader



PropelNext is an intensive cohort-based, capacity-building program designed by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) to enhance the performance of promising nonprofits that serve America’s disadvantaged youth. In partnership with the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Sobrato Family Foundation, and the Weingart Foundation, EMCF launched the second cohort in 2015 comprised of 14 nonprofits in Southern and Northern California.

PropelNext stands out from other capacity-building initiatives with the depth and breadth of support it provides to help nonprofits develop performance management practices and cultivate data-driven decision making. The supports include customized coaching, peer learning sessions, small group coaching workshops, and an online learning community (OLC). Through the three-year initiative, grantees sharpen their program models, develop theories of change (TOCs), implement performance management systems, and cultivate cultures of learning and continuous improvement.

With a commitment to learning, EMCF partnered with Engage R+D and Harder+Company Community Research to assess the context, development, and implementation of PropelNext, as well as generate timely insights to refine the model. The developmental evaluation also captures baseline information that can be used to assess the impact of this work over time. The evaluation synthesizes data from multiple sources and perspectives using mixed methods that include surveys, interviews, focus groups, site visits, meeting observations, and document review.

Findings clearly demonstrate that PropelNext has provided a solid foundation for learning and growth and is catalyzing organizations to a new level of performance and sophistication. While grantees acknowledge the road ahead will likely be full of bumps and detours, they have acquired new knowledge, skills and capabilities to weather the ride. This executive summary, and the full report, highlight key results and insights about the challenges, facilitators, and nuances of building a learning organization.

## Results and Key Takeaways

### **Organizations are implementing well-designed programs with increased fidelity and measurable outcomes** |

Grantees have developed research-informed program models and are using data to design and improve programs. They have gained clarity, confidence and skills to design, test, and implement programs with fidelity. At the end of PropelNext, data use practices have permeated the leadership and management teams, and leaders are working to extend these practices to frontline staff. Key takeaways include:

- **Well-designed evidence-based programs:** Grantees have made significant progress implementing evidence-based program models with clear target populations, outcomes, phasing, and dosage. Since PropelNext began, nearly all (88%) organizational leaders said they are progressing or at an advanced stage of implementing codified models, compared to three percent pre-PropelNext. This trajectory is similar to the National 2015 Cohort, in which 83 percent of leaders said they had substantially met or were at an advanced stage with this practice, compared to six percent prior to PropelNext.
- **Strengthening fidelity and accountability:** Grantees are more attuned to program fidelity and processes for ensuring accountability. Several organizations have changed the structure of meetings to improve program fidelity but acknowledged it's still a work in progress. A noteworthy indicator of progress is the addition of an individual or team responsible for monitoring fidelity to the program model and theory of change. Only six percent of leaders reported progress or having dedicated staff to monitor fidelity pre-PropelNext. By the end of the program, 75 percent of organizations were progressing or at an advanced stage.
- **Strengthening focus on outcomes for youth:** Given the developmental phase of the pilot programs, it's still premature to fully assess improvements in youth outcomes, however, grantees are gaining clarity and building capacity to more accurately identify and gather meaningful outcomes for participants. Despite the lengthy trajectory for tracking outcomes, 85 percent of organizations provided evidence of meeting at least one of their program progress indicators and outcomes by the end of PropelNext. Overall, there were higher rates of referral, enrollment, participation, and retention of program participants evidenced in year three data reports compared to year two. Many of the organizations also had notable increases in the rate at which participants achieved program outcomes year over year. The year three data reports also showed increased sophistication in analysis of their target population.

### **Organizations have more robust systems, infrastructure, and capacity to support data use** |

Grantees have been implementing and refining data systems to systematically collect and use data. While some have had technical challenges, the vast majority said having a centralized system has been a significant achievement. They are also building their human capacity to train staff to use data for continuous improvement. Most grantees now have at least one or more full-time staff dedicated to data and strategic learning.



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**“The best practices actually indicated [the way we were originally designing the project] wasn't effective. In fact, it can cause negative outcomes if it's implemented that way. Without doing that research, we would've blundered forward.”**

**–Staff member**

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- **Strengthening capacity of frontline staff to use data:** By the end of PropelNext, 79 percent of organizations reported they are progressing or at an advanced stage of ensuring staff have access to data, compared to nine percent at the beginning. In addition to access, organizations are building their muscle to use data. Some ways frontline staff are engaging with data include entering their own data, running reports, and engaging in analytic discussions with their teams. A staff survey also indicates staff are becoming more confident using, interpreting, and engaging in data discussions.
- **Building internal learning and evaluation team:** Prior to PropelNext, very few grantees had a full-time person dedicated to data use and strategic learning. By the end of PropelNext, 36 percent said they were progressing, and 58 percent said they were in an advanced stage. By the end of the program, most grantees have approximately one full-time person and several have 2-3 full-time team members dedicated to this function. Interviews with organizational leaders and meeting observations provided additional evidence that these positions are bolstering efforts to spread and deepen a data-driven culture across programs and departments.

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**“We’ve made shifts to our program model as a result of either looking at data or team meetings – [asking questions] like what is and isn’t working? What do we need to do? We haven’t remained static through this process.”**

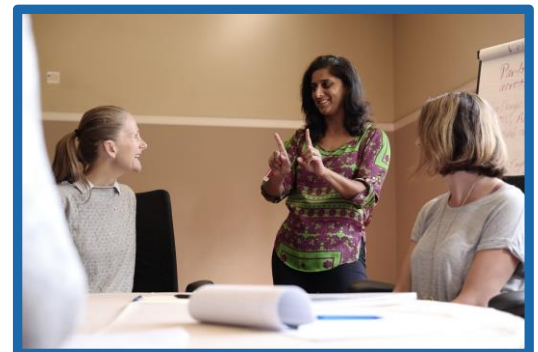
**- Leader**

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### **Leaders are modeling data use practices and inspiring a learning culture |**

In addition to engaging staff, leaders are strengthening their leadership teams and engaging their boards in strategic learning. Navigating change has been, and continues to be, a work in progress. Nonetheless leaders have gained new skills and insights for managing both challenges and opportunities.

- **Inspiring a culture of inquiry and learning:** Organizational leaders are encouraging curiosity by creating more space and opportunities to engage staff in reflecting on results and discussing opportunities for improvement. Prior to PropelNext, 66 percent of leaders said this was not a common practice. By the end of PropelNext, 82 percent said they were progressing or in advanced stage of implementing this practice. This trend mirrors the progression observed with the National 2015 Cohort. When staff were asked whether a culture of inquiry was present across all levels of the organization, most said the organization was making progress (46%) or in an advanced stage of implementing this practice (34%). These data provide further evidence a culture shift is taking root.
- **Modeling a reflective practice and data-driven decision-making:** At the beginning of PropelNext, most organizational leaders (85%) said they did not regularly share program and organizational results with the staff and board. Three years later, there was a notable shift, with 79 percent of leaders indicating they were making progress or in an advanced stage of implementing this practice. Acknowledging and learning from failure are other important practices that spark reflection and continuous improvement and survey results provide further evidence that this is taking place.



### **Leaders are intentionally aligning talent with organizational needs and performance goals |**

Several organizations have been restructuring, creating new positions, and assessing talent needs to more effectively support their work. Some organizations have experienced significant staff turnover which, while challenging, has created opportunities to recruit staff with new skillsets. They are also working to clarify new performance expectations and are implementing creative strategies to energize staff.

- **Getting the right people in the right seats:** At the beginning of the program, the concept of talent alignment was not really on the radar for most leaders, and the vast majority (94%) either weren’t sure or were in very early stages of “getting

the right people in the right seats.” The Propel/Next program created greater awareness about what it means both conceptually and in practice to align individual strengths and skills with the appropriate responsibilities and expectations. Despite, or perhaps because of, recent staff turnover, 82 percent of leaders felt they had made strong progress in this area.

- **Communicating expectations and standards of excellence:** Upon completion of Propel/Next, most grantees are still in the early phase of this evolving process but clearly recognize the importance of communicating expectations and strengthening staff performance reviews. Both leaders and staff mentioned one-on-one weekly and monthly supervision check-ins as the main mechanism for communicating expectations and providing feedback. Results from the survey suggest a clear shift, with nearly 80 percent of leaders indicating managers are progressing or in an advanced stage of consistently communicating expectations and accountability, compared to 9 percent at the beginning of Propel/Next. When asked the same question, 78 percent of staff felt their organizations were progressing or at an advanced stage with the implementation of this practice.

### **Organizations are intentionally working to integrate learning and data-driven decision making across the organization** |

Grantees are initiating cross-department and cross-program teams to discuss and interpret data, leading to more collaboration and youth-centric programming. Several organizations said increased collaboration and breaking down silos have been one of the biggest achievements from Propel/Next thus far.

- **Using data to inform operational, programmatic and strategic decisions:** Organizational leaders reported a substantial shift in using data to inform all types of organizational decisions, rather than relying on intuition alone. Prior to Propel/Next, most leaders (70%) acknowledged they simply did not implement, or were in an early stage of implementing, this practice; and 24 percent were unsure or unable to assess. That shifted quite dramatically by the end of Propel/Next, with 94 percent either progressing or in an advanced stage of using data to make decisions. When surveyed, staff largely concurred with 70 percent saying their organization was progressing (52%) or in an advanced stage (18%).
- **Integrating the theory of change framework into the organization’s DNA:** Most grantees have begun the process of extending the program model and theory of change frameworks to other programs and areas of the organization. These efforts have been supported by cross-departmental learning that seeks to reduce the silos and engage staff in collaborative learning. Prior to Propel/Next, the majority did not regularly use theories of change to guide their programming. Post-Propel/Next, 75 percent of leaders said they are progressing or in an advanced stage of integrating a theory of change framework into their organizational DNA.

### **Efforts to sustain momentum through fund development, partnerships and stronger communications** |

Sustainability continues to be top of mind, and grantees expressed concerns about the increased costs associated with the infrastructure and talent needed to improve quality and raise the bar. At the same time, some have been able to attract funding from new sources and believe this work has increased their profile and credibility. Several also noted instances and opportunities to strengthen relationships with funders and to influence the funding community.

- **Retaining and attracting new sources of funding:** Grantees are experiencing some success attracting and retaining funding. A total of 47 percent are at an advanced stage bringing in funding from new sources

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**“You realize what they’re really up against in being able to sustain this work within their organizations and how few funders are willing to support this...the field really hasn’t shifted in valuing this work or wanting to invest in this area. We still have a long way to go.”**

**- Co-investor**

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(compared to 15% pre-PropelNext) and 41 percent are progressing (compared to 27% pre-PropelNext). Survey results also reveal grantees are retaining existing funding. At the end of PropelNext, 55 percent of leaders indicated advanced progress in this domain, compared to 27 percent at the start.

- **Strengthening relationships and credibility with other funders:** Grantees and co-investors reported their relationships have strengthened as a result of PropelNext. One co-investor explained how they are continuing to provide unrestricted support to their PropelNext grantees because they recognize “the real concern for most of them is how they are going to be able to sustain these specific positions given some of the infrastructure changes.” The California 2018 Cohort is grappling with the real cost of operating at a higher level and staying competitive when bidding for contracts. One co-investor referred to this as “the cliff”, noting “A lot of these organizations meet the challenge of being a lot more sophisticated than they were coming in and now they need to start attracting different funders.”

### Concluding Remarks

PropelNext strives to create a sense of community and a strong peer-based learning experience. The peer support and connections developed within and across both cohorts has been yet another benefit of the PropelNext model with potentially lasting effects. Grantees expressed gratitude for the depth, rigor, and collaborative spirit with which the funders and consulting team delivered the content and support. For most grantees, the end of the program has been bittersweet. “The process in general, as hard as it was at times, was transformative,” an executive director said. “We’re a completely different organization three years later.” As another leader put it, “This isn’t something that comes to an end. This is the beginning of what lies ahead.”

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**“I’ve participated in other capacity-building [programs] with other funders, but this felt like they were really truly invested in us. We could be vulnerable...we could leave all [those concerns] at the door, and just dive into the messiness. If they hadn’t figured out how to create that early on, it would’ve been a completely different process.”**

**- Leader**

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