

## Lessons from the Field

When the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation launched PropelNext, our vision was ambitious: to enable promising nonprofits to better transform the lives of disadvantaged youth. Our goal was to help these nonprofits connect their passion for improving young lives with sharpened skills to measure their impact and amplify their effectiveness.

We began with a simple hypothesis: every organization can benefit from using data to improve programs and amplify impact, particularly small to mid-sized ones that have limited resources to do so.

Converting this hypothesis into reality turned out to be a complex endeavor. We began in 2012 by inviting 15 organizations to become the inaugural class of PropelNext grantees, and we worked closely with them over three years. We recently added a second cohort in 2015 to further improve and expand on the original idea and to reach additional organizations.

Over the past four years we have learned an enormous amount about how to help organizations develop the systems and cultures they need to continually learn and improve their programs. Grantees sharpened their programs considerably based on evidence of what works. They focused on their target populations, refined outcomes and implemented performance management systems to track impact. All of this enabled them to direct resources to their highest-impact initiatives while pruning less effective ones. Equipped with strong program models and data systems, PropelNext grantees are now better able to articulate their achievements, engage new funders and seize emerging opportunities.

We contracted with Child Trends, a leading research organization, to conduct an internal evaluation of our work with the first cohort, and to help us identify ways to strengthen the initiative. Child Trends studied two years of this three-year program and found that PropelNext strengthened nonprofits' capacity to be data-driven learning organizations.

Based on their internal evaluation report and our own experience, we identified lessons that we, as funders, are applying to become more effective, and we are delighted to share these lessons here. We hope it will be a useful tool for others interested in investing in performance improvement.

## Results

PropelNext grantees significantly improved their programs. Their accomplishments include:

- Rethinking their program models based on research and best practices in the field.
- Aligning program delivery with their new program models.
- Implementing performance management systems to track key program indicators and outcomes.
- Building a learning culture and infusing it throughout the organization.
- Forming a network of nonprofit leaders dedicated to learning and improvement.

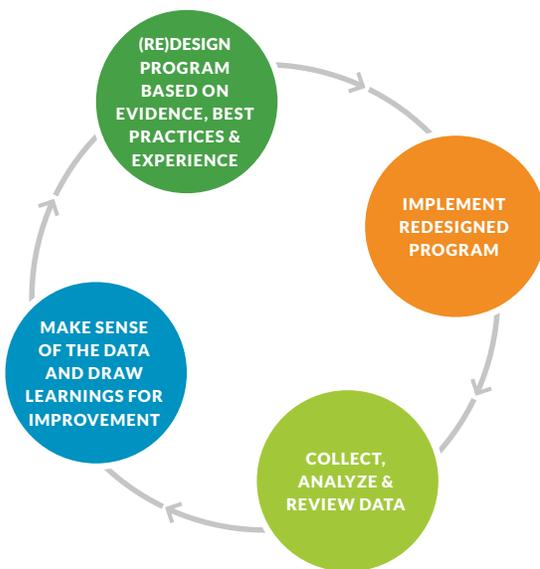
PropelNext guides organizations to start an ongoing cycle of learning to improve their programs, making changes, studying the results and using those results to improve programs even further.

**Nick Ehrmann, CEO of Blue Engine**, an education organization in New York City, described how PropelNext led to measurable results. “The speed at which we can make changes to our programs and evaluate...radically accelerated. Our results in algebra have gone up by 2½ times.”

Grantees pushed themselves to look beyond the obvious and challenge long-standing traditions. **Mike Duggan, executive director of Domus Kids**, a Connecticut nonprofit that serves disadvantaged youth, explained how Domus narrowed its scope of work to focus on interventions that made the biggest difference. “Our staff was doing things that weren’t helping the young person reach their goals. We narrowed the scope of work to help them be clear about what they had to do to so young people can become productive members of society.”

**Christa Gannon, founder and CEO of Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY)**, a nonprofit dedicated to breaking the cycle of violence, crime and incarceration of teens, said that by looking at the data, her organization gained the confidence that it is doing the most it can for the young people in the program. “We have approaches to the work that are different than before PropelNext. I can ask people to invest in us and know that I will be able to deliver at a very high level.”

### THE CYCLE OF LEARNING



## Lessons

We have learned several lessons from both the evaluation and our experience. By sharing them here, we hope to make it easier and more efficient for funders to invest in organizational learning and improvement.

### Organizations need to build cultures that value learning in order to succeed.

Through PropelNext, we came to understand that creating learning-focused cultures is essential to improving outcomes and that investing in technology or tools without a learning orientation in place was leaving the job half done. However, this type of culture change requires an intensity of effort and resources that we didn't expect at the outset. Nevertheless, we believe this investment was essential to institutionalize the capacity to use data and learn from it.

### Performance improvement requires a multi-pronged approach.

PropelNext grants enabled staff to invest time in researching and developing theories of change, and in purchasing and implementing performance management systems. However, without expert coaching, grantees could not have completed these tasks as effectively. At best, it would have taken them much longer to make progress. PropelNext coaches worked closely with each grantee to consider the tough questions that are part of developing a theory of change, sift through dozens of options in order to identify the appropriate indicators to track, and select performance measurement systems. Grantees used the group learning sessions to share experiences, support one another and move forward as a group. Tess Reynolds of New Door Ventures explained the role of coaching. "We started by looking at our theory of change and refining it with the help of expert coaches. The coaches forced us to clarify what we wanted from our programs."

### A technology assessment lays a strong foundation.

A technology assessment provides the information an organization needs to select an effective data system to measure performance. Many organizations simply speak to a vendor and then purchase a system without fully understanding what they need and how to find the technology that will work best for them. We funded the assessment and then the purchase and implementation of that technology.

### High-quality program design requires time and patience.

At first, we were surprised at how long this process took. Our approach to program design emphasizes outcomes. It requires detailed study and analysis of every aspect of a program, from staff job descriptions to target populations to short- and long-term outcomes. Our grantees conducted multiple cycles of testing and revising to improve their program designs. Right now we are piloting several approaches to make this process more efficient.

### About PropelNext and Its Grantees

PropelNext grantees start with a desire to achieve better outcomes for the vulnerable young people in their programs. Their leaders are committed to and curious about ways they can improve programs and build learning cultures. The organizations are established in their communities and have been in operation for at least three years.

PropelNext's comprehensive mix of grants and services helps organizations develop the mastery to turn their program visions into reality. Our initiative—which includes expert coaching, group learning sessions and a robust peer network—builds grantees' ability to convert data into valuable insights, fosters greater focus and clarity of purpose and creates a culture of continual self-assessment and learning. Our [theory of change page](#) explains how PropelNext aims to deepen organizations' ability to change outcomes for disadvantaged youth.

The second class of PropelNext grantees includes 15 youth organizations in California. It is funded by five foundations: the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Sobrato Family Foundation, Weingart Foundation, and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. With this group we will be applying the lessons learned thus far, and we look forward to sharing our progress.