

The Road to High Performance

Key Findings from the PropelNext Alumni Study

Executive Summary

June 2018



PropelNext is a comprehensive, cohort-based, capacity-building program launched by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) to enhance the effectiveness of promising nonprofits serving America's disadvantaged youth. With a focus on high-quality programming, grantees participate in a structured three-year program that helps them build the knowledge, infrastructure, and practices they need to become data-driven learning organizations. EMCF believes that supporting organizations to use data will strengthen their programs and, ultimately, improve outcomes for youth.

The first national cohort completed PropelNext in 2015. To better understand the impact of the program, EMCF partnered with Harder+Company Community Research and Engage R+D to assess post-program progress, achievements, and challenges. The evaluation synthesized data from a multitude of sources and perspectives using mixed methods that included surveys, interviews, focus groups, site visits, and document review. The study unearthed promising evidence that alumni have embedded a learning culture and performance management practices deep into their organizational DNA. More than two years after completion, alumni organizations described their experience as transformational, with one CEO asserting, "You can't go back to what you were before."

While the initial focus of PropelNext was on data-informed program models, the work extended far beyond programming and has had profound implications for nearly every aspect of organizational performance. The practices learned during PropelNext were not "one and done" events but were part of a long-term journey to embed a culture of learning and continuous improvement across an organization. Two years after completing the program, the majority of organizations have sustained, deepened, and, in many cases, advanced performance-management capacities across a spectrum of areas. This executive summary and the full report highlight key results and insights about the challenges, facilitators, and nuances of building a learning organization.

"We always talked about having the head and the heart, but the heart led and then the head came along. [Now] we lead more with the head from a heart-centered place. That was a big shift."

—Alumni leader

Key Takeaways and Results

Alumni organizations are implementing data-driven programs with increased attention to quality and fidelity | Alumni organizations are

delivering higher-quality programs with codified models that are based on research, clear target populations, intended outcomes, and program components with in-depth definition of dosage and duration. Organizations are also improving implementation fidelity by developing guidelines, engaging staff in data use, and providing more intensive supervision.

- Institutionalizing codified program models and implementation fidelity:** Prior to PropelNext, organizational leaders acknowledged that their programming was often driven by intuition rather than evidence. Post-PropelNext, 91 percent of leaders indicated that their organizations use the best available data to develop and refine their programs. The majority of leaders (87 percent) said that their organizations had since created individual or team positions that were responsible for monitoring implementation fidelity, compared to 11 percent pre-PropelNext. Several alumni also changed the frequency and structure of program and staff meetings to improve program fidelity. Others have restructured supervision to become fidelity-driven, spending more hands-on time with frontline staff to discuss data before having conversations about what should happen next.
- Expanding reach and serving more disadvantaged youth:** Ten out of 12 alumni organizations are now serving more youth, with a median growth of 53 percent. Organizations have also increased their program options and have begun to grow their programs through partnerships and expansion into additional geographic sites. One organization doubled their number of school partnerships, while another expanded programming to 13 new cities. Funders, board members, and partners cited expansion into new places and serving more youth as being among the most noteworthy alumni achievements over the last three to five years.



“We have a way more defined program model than we did in the past . . . we know what we’re all working towards.”

–Alumni staff member

Alumni organizations have more robust performance-

management systems and data-use practices | All 12 organizations are using more robust data systems and are giving frontline staff access to data to help strengthen program delivery. Staff members are increasing both their capacity and confidence to use data, as well as their ability to think critically about relevance and utility.

- Building capacity to collect and use data:** Prior to PropelNext, seven of the 12 organizations did not have dedicated data and evaluation staff. Nearly two years after the program, 11 of the 12 have dedicated staff with an average team size of 2.3 full-time staff, compared to 0.5 full-time staff in 2012. Leaders indicated that, prior to PropelNext, frontline staff had limited or no access to data. Two years post-program, 78 percent of leaders indicated that frontline staff members use data on a daily basis to more effectively perform their work. A review of data reports that were generated both before and after PropelNext revealed notable improvements in utility, level of rigor, and ability to synthesize information across multiple sources.
- Increasing confidence to use and interpret data:** More than two-thirds of staff reported feeling “very confident” or “completely confident” determining what data should be collected to improve programs and assess participant

outcomes. Staff members are using data to monitor progress and make course corrections. As one staff member put it, “Data’s in almost everything we do.” During site visits, the evaluation team observed frontline staff thoughtfully presenting and analyzing data as well as troubleshooting, asking critical questions, and discussing actionable next steps.

PropelNext has helped enhance the capacity of leaders to inspire a learning culture and commitment to high performance | Alumni leaders are communicating a clear vision while modeling a learning culture through the systematic sharing of results and using of data to make operational and strategic decisions.

- Modeling a learning culture:** Prior to PropelNext, the majority of leaders noted how sharing programs and organizational results with staff and board members was not a common practice. After PropelNext, 86 percent indicated that they regularly shared and discussed results. One director shared their frequent practice of pausing during discussions or staff meetings to say, “Why don’t we put this conversation on hold until we actually have the data.” Staff provided corroborating evidence, with 79 percent indicating how organizational leaders regularly share results and discuss goals. Observations and focus groups with staff provided additional evidence of how leaders encourage continuous improvement and curiosity.
- Making disciplined and data-driven decisions:** Prior to PropelNext, leaders found it difficult to cite specific cases where they cut back or eliminated efforts that were revealed to be ineffective or unsustainable. Two years after PropelNext, over 80 percent of leaders could cite specific examples where they had both the data and courage to make tough decisions. Interviews with board members revealed further evidence of more disciplined decision making. Examples included eliminating programs that were ineffective, making difficult staffing decisions, and reconsidering partnerships and funding opportunities that did not align with the organization’s mission and/or commitment to data, learning, and continuous quality improvement.



“[Before] we weren’t really a learning organization. We were a reactionary organization . . . more intuitive than intentional.”

–Alumni leader

Alumni organizations are strategically investing in talent and aligning talent needs to achieve better results | Organizations are making important strides to develop and align talent to meet organizational needs and to engage staff in an environment that values learning, reflection, and continuous improvement.

- Implementing people-focused management structures and practices:** All organizations have become more intentional in their approach to developing high-performing teams. Several of them have elevated or created senior-level talent-management positions to focus on staff engagement and coordination. Others have worked to strengthen middle management and develop more robust leadership teams.
- Aligning talent needs with organizational goals:** While not an easy process, organizational leaders revealed considerable progress in “getting the right people in the right seats.” Prior to 2012, there was ambivalence about the issue, with 36 percent unsure or unable to assess, and 56 percent indicating substantial work that still needed to be done. Two years post-program, 86 percent of leaders indicated having made substantial progress toward this goal. With a keen understanding of skills and attributes needed to

strengthen performance, nearly all grantees have made changes to their recruitment, hiring, and onboarding processes.

- **Raising the bar and clarifying performance expectations:** Prior to Propel/Next, the majority of organizational leaders said standards of excellence were not clearly articulated or communicated. Post-Propel/Next, the majority of leaders (81 percent) said managers have implemented this practice and more than three-quarters of staff indicated that managers regularly conducted performance reviews and worked with staff to mutually define strengths and opportunities for improvement. In focus groups, staff members provided specific examples of how they engaged with supervisors and managers to both clarify expectations and identify professional development goals.

Alumni organizations have sustained gains and expanded their impact in their communities |

While Propel/Next is not a financial capacity-building program, its focus on performance management has implications for program expansion, fund development, external communications, and strategic partnerships. Most organizations are attracting new funding, serving more youth, strengthening partnerships, and sharpening their communications.

- **Retaining and attracting new sources of funding:** Over three-quarters of alumni organizations have secured new sources of funding and/or retained funding from existing funders. Ten out of 12 organizations have increased their budgets, with a median growth of 36 percent between 2012 and 2016. Leaders and core funders both pointed to stronger, more transparent, and more collaborative grantee–funder relationships. Over 70 percent of leaders said that they have been engaging in more constructive dialogue with funders about their data requirements.
- **Strengthening strategic partnerships and credibility as field leaders:** Alumni organizations have been increasingly recognized as credible, data-driven, and results-focused leaders among funders, partners, and peer organizations. Many alumni organizations have expanded their partnerships and reported improvement in the overall quality of those relationships. Half of CEOs said that it had been “easy” or “very easy” to engage external partners (e.g., schools) in their new way of running youth development programs. Interviews with peer organizations and partners provided additional evidence of increased credibility in their respective communities.
- **Communicating a more compelling story of impact:** Since Propel/Next, alumni have increased their capacity to use data to tell more compelling stories. Communication materials, newsletters, and websites have evolved and improved, and have often included dynamic visuals and charts that clearly show organizational goals, strategies, progress, and outcomes. Several funders and board members noted that there has been more data-informed storytelling and analytical rigor behind alumni’s messaging.



“We used to just tell heart-wrenching stories . . . now we’re saying, ‘This is what we’ve accomplished . . . here are the outcomes we produced.’”

–Alumni leader

Concluding Remarks

In addition to documenting evidence of progress on the journey to high performance, this study highlights the ripple effect of Propel/Next’s capacity-building strategies beyond program design and implementation. Two years post-Propel/Next, organizations have continued to build muscle and core competencies

for performance management, resulting in notable shifts in organizational practices, behaviors, processes, and culture.

As pioneers in “uncharted territory,” alumni organizations reflected on the most critical Propel/Next components that helped propel them to the next level. While the combination of intensive and comprehensive supports is part of what makes Propel/Next a powerful program, both the high-caliber coaching and cohort-based peer-learning model were acknowledged as “game changers.” With encouragement from EMCF, alumni organizations have developed a strong sense of community, as well as a willingness to lend their support to the Propel/Next cohorts that will follow in their footsteps. As one leader put it, “We would jump at any opportunity to collaborate. We’re like the [Harvard Business School] graduates that stay in touch for 50 years.” Others recognized their role and responsibility to advance the field and improve outcomes for at-risk youth. “[We’re] part of elevating the nonprofit sector,” said one executive director, a part working “to create a new standard of doing things for our most vulnerable kids.” 🇺🇸

Photo credit for the pictures on page one and two: Ian Christmann