MARCH 2020

CULTIVATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

POST-PROGRAM FINDINGS FOR THE FIRST TWO COHORTS OF PROPEL*NEXT*

engage R+D

Introduction

Drawing on research and hands-on experience in organizational effectiveness and performance management, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) developed Propel*Next*, an intensive program designed to build the capacity of promising nonprofits to deliver high-quality services that improve life outcomes for increasing numbers of economically disadvantaged youth in the U.S. The first Propel*Next* cohort, which participated from 2012 to 2015, originally comprised 15 organizations across the country. EMCF led a second, California-based cohort of 15 organizations from 2015 to 2018 in partnership with the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Sobrato Family Foundation, and the Weingart Foundation. In fall 2018, a third cohort of 12 exclusively Northern California-based organizations began the program supported by the Edna McConnell Clark, William and Flora Hewlett, David and Lucile Packard, Sobrato Family, and Heising-Simons foundations.

These cohorts of grantees have participated in a structured three-year program supported by a team of experienced consultants that helps them build the knowledge, infrastructure, and practices to become data-driven learning organizations. EMCF and its funding partners believe that helping youth-serving organizations establish and apply robust performance measures can strengthen their programs, increase the number of youth to whom they deliver high-quality services, and improve outcomes for these youth. To achieve this, Propel*Next* seeks to ensure that:

- Youth-serving organizations fully vet, test, and refine their program goals and approach to create codified program models;

- Organizations make better use of data to generate insights that inform and continuously improve their work; and

- Organizations are stronger, more capable of delivering better results, and better prepared for evaluation, thus increasing their potential for funding and expansion.

Propel*Next* has modeled its commitment to learning and continuous improvement by commissioning an external evaluator to assess the implementation and effectiveness of the Propel*Next* program across all three cohorts, contributing to a deeper understanding of the longer-term impact of the model on participating organizations. As part of this work, Engage R+D partnered with Propel*Next* to assess post-program progress at the organizational level for the first two cohorts (National 2015 Cohort and California 2018 Cohort) as a follow up on previous evaluation reports that focus primarily on delineating findings based on role (e.g., organizational leaders and other staff) irrespective of their organization. Results from this work demonstrate that Propel*Next* has **provided a solid foundation for learning as organizations continue to strengthen their capacities across various functions and organizational domains.** These findings are explored in more detail in this report.

> Previous evaluation studies and findings from this report provide evidence that **Propel*Next* strengthens the overall capacity of organizations** and has been particularly impactful in a number of areas, including the design and implementation of **data-informed and codified program models,** the improved **use of data and technology,** greater adherence to **performance management practices,** and **sustainability.**

Learning Questions and Methods

Engage R+D examined both cohorts that have completed Propel*Next* on an organization-by-organization basis to answer the following questions:

1. **Improving overall organizational capacity and operations:** How effective is Propel*Next* in stimulating improvements in organizational capacity and operations?

2. **Tracking areas of progress:** In what areas of organizational functioning is Propel*Next* most effective in building the capacity of its grantees to serve underserved youth?

These questions and their answers are informed by data gathered through retrospective pre–post surveys and interviews with leaders and staff from grantee organizations in the National 2015 Cohort and the California 2018 Cohort (see Appendix for more information on methodology). The use of a retrospective format to assess pre–post program change was in response to the lack of baseline data available. To enhance the representativeness of responses, multiple leaders

and staff members at each organization were each asked to complete the survey as well as participate in the interviews. The evaluation team also asked leaders and staff to provide specific examples of shifts in practices, processes, and outcomes. It is important to note that although members of both cohorts completed the surveys after they graduated from Propel*Next*, the National 2015 Cohort was surveyed two years after the program ended, while the California 2018 Cohort was surveyed just two months after completing the program. Overall, both cohorts showed evidence of continued progress following the program.

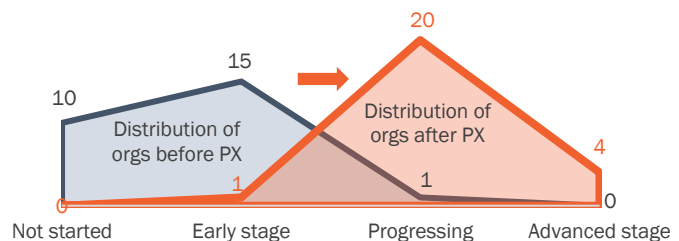## Improving Overall Organizational Capacity

Propel*Next* grantees strengthened their organizational capacity, making the greatest progress in the areas of program model design and implementation, use of data and technology, performance management practices, and sustainability.

Performance management is rooted in the practice of tracking the right performance data and converting it into actionable information that supports tactical and strategic decision-making. Several foundational pieces need to be in place to support performance management. One key component is providing services based on codified program models that are evidence-based, aimed at well-defined target populations, and include clear outcomes, phasing, and dosage of activities. A robust data collection system and data use practices that align staff efforts with outcomes and clear performance targets are also key to systematically capturing the results of those services. Accurate and accessible data enable a team to engage in reflective practices, using that data to enhance learning and improve organizational and program performance. Although performance management and quality improvement have positive and reverberating implications for an organization and the people it serves, they can also increase talent and infrastructure costs. When assessing the depth and durability of a grantee's performance management system, it is important to consider the organization's ability to sustain a performance management culture over time.

Shifts in Capacity: At the end of each program, organizations were asked to rank their capacity and operations along four domains at two points in time: (1) prior to starting Propel*Next* and (2) after completing the program. Rankings were based on a scale from *not started* through *advanced stage* of development. The graphs below reflect a cumulative series of data points that show the distribution of organizations along the scale for both time periods, allowing us to see the growth reported to have occurred in each domain.

Program Model Design and Implementation (n=25-26 organizations)*

A core component of Propel*Next* is designing, testing, and refining data-driven programs that are guided by a strong theory of change and informed by the best available research. Prior to Propel*Next*, organizations rated themselves as having lower levels of capacity in the area of robust and codified program model design and implementation than in any other domain. Ten of the 26 organizations from the first two cohorts had *not started* and 15 were at an *early*

Note: One organization did not complete the "after" portion of the survey.

stage of development before Propel*Next*. By the program's end, organizations had made considerable progress, with 24 organizations *progressing* or at an *advanced stage* of development.
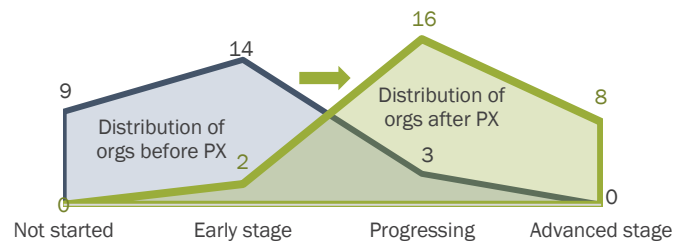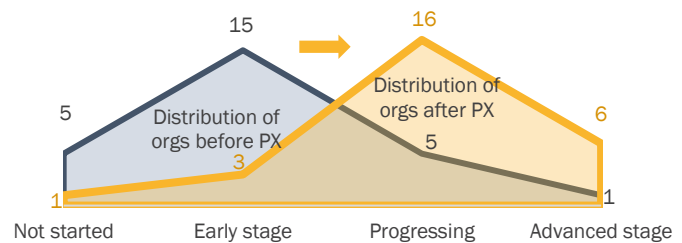
Data and Technology (n=26)

Most organizations collected data in some form before Propel*Next*, but many were not leveraging technology effectively and lacked data systems that met their needs. As in the program model domain, the majority of organizations had *not started* or were at an *early stage* of development prior to Propel*Next*. At the conclusion of the program, all organizations had begun working on this domain, with all but two at the *progressing* or *advanced stage*. Having ownership of and control over their own data systems has created opportunities for new programs, additional funding, stronger partnerships, and greater impact that were previously unattainable because of inconsistent data.

Distribution of orgs before PX
Distribution of orgs after PX

| Not started | Early stage | Progressing | Advanced stage |

Capacity for Performance Management (n=26)

In addition to increased data access, organizations are working to build their muscle to use data. Before Propel*Next*, 5 of the 26 organizations had *not started* implementing performance management practices, and 15 ranked themselves as *early stage*. By the conclusion of the program, all but one had started working on deepening performance management practices, with 16 *progressing* and 6 at an *advanced stage*.

Distribution of orgs before PX
Distribution of orgs after PX

| Not started | Early stage | Progressing | Advanced stage |

Sustainability (n=26)

Compared to the other domains, grantees made considerably more progress in sustainability. Before starting Propel*Next*, all but one organization were working in this area. After Propel*Next*, all but one were either *progressing* or at an *advanced stage*. Grantees reported building their capacity for sustainability by attracting funding from new sources and strengthening relationships with funders and partners to continue refining and potentially expanding their work. Across the four domains, the largest number of organizations (n=10) are at advanced stage in this area, although they also started out further along in this domain than in the others.

Distribution of orgs before PX
Distribution of orgs after PX

| Not started | Early stage | Progressing | Advanced stage |

Tracking Areas of Progress

Embedding performance management practices in organizational DNA and cultivating a learning culture take time, with some changes developing more quickly than others.
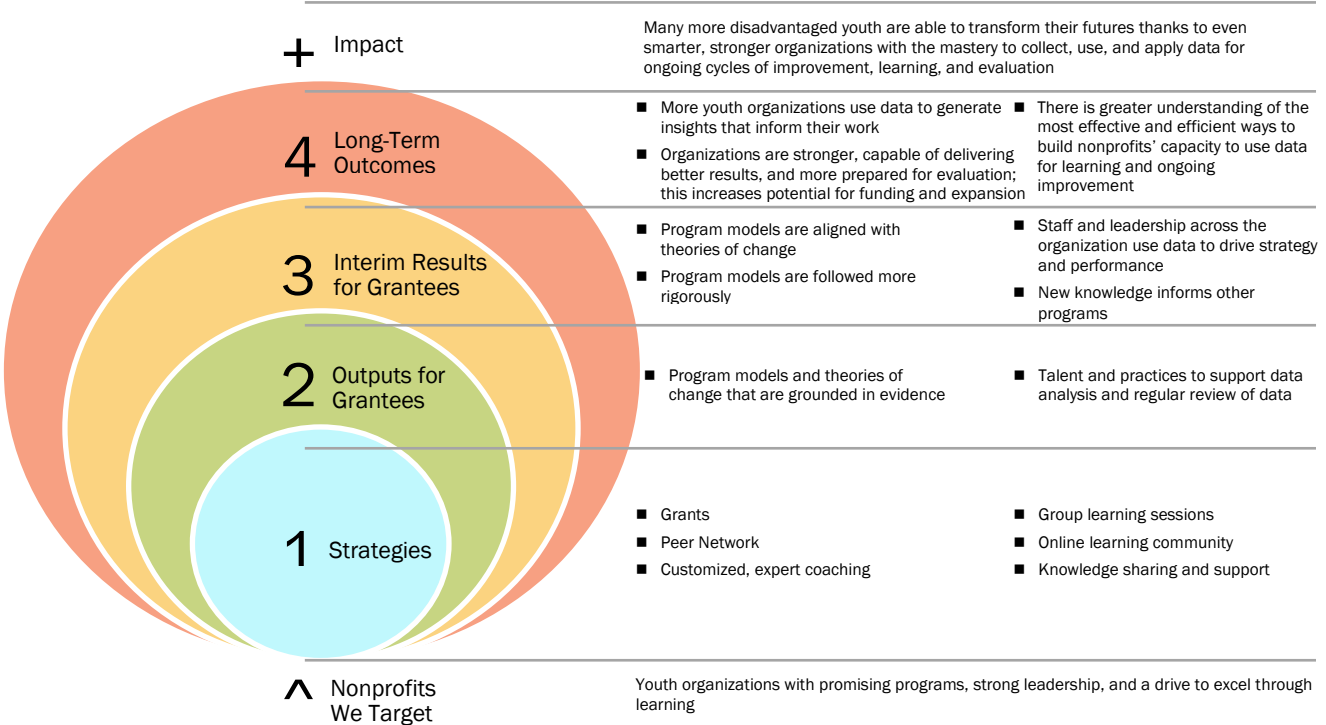
The previous section provided a broad overview of how grantees progressed across four domains of organizational capacity. This section dives deeper into understanding what this work looks like in practice. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered over years tells a story of where organizations have made the most progress and where building organizational muscle requires more time and practice.

According to Propel*Next*'s Theory of Change, shown below, the initiative's strategies should first result in outputs for grantees such as program models and theories of change that are grounded in evidence and practices that support regular review and analysis of program data. These developments lead to interim results for grantees, including program models that are aligned and implemented more consistently with the theory of change, the use of data by staff and leadership, and new knowledge that informs other programs. This results in long-term outcomes such as data that help generate insights and inform the work, increased potential for funding and expansion, and a greater capacity for learning and improvement. These organization-level outcomes are intended to enable participating organizations to deliver services that result in improved outcomes for the youth they serve. For example, despite the lengthy trajectory for tracking outcomes, 85 percent of California 2018 Cohort organizations provided evidence of meeting at least one of their program progress indicators and outcomes by the end of Propel*Next*. Overall, there were higher rates of referral, enrollment, participation, and retention of program participants evidenced in their year-over-year data reports. Many of the organizations also demonstrated increased sophistication in analysis of their target population and notable increases in the rate at which participants achieved program outcomes.

Key areas of focus for Propel*Next* include developing robust program models, gathering more meaningful data, and sharpening data-use practices to encourage a culture of learning within participating organizations. Thus, we would expect to see the most progress in those areas. For example, at the conclusion of Propel*Next*, we would expect organizations to have made considerable progress in using data for program improvement (a grantee output) before achieving longer-term outcomes. Indeed, we found that organizations have made the greatest gains in the areas of grantee outputs and interim results. Long-term outcomes naturally take more time, but organizations are making steady progress post-Propel*Next* and are at a more advanced stage of development than before they entered the program.

Propel*Next* Theory of Change: Propel*Next*'s goal is to propel promising nonprofits to make a greater impact on the lives of America's disadvantaged youth. They accomplish this by helping nonprofits strengthen their youth program design and implementation and use of data for learning and improvement.

+ Impact	Many more disadvantaged youth are able to transform their futures thanks to even smarter, stronger organizations with the mastery to collect, use, and apply data for ongoing cycles of improvement, learning, and evaluation	
4 Long-Term Outcomes	■ More youth organizations use data to generate insights that inform their work ■ Organizations are stronger, capable of delivering better results, and more prepared for evaluation; this increases potential for funding and expansion	■ There is greater understanding of the most effective and efficient ways to build nonprofits' capacity to use data for learning and ongoing improvement
3 Interim Results for Grantees	■ Program models are aligned with theories of change ■ Program models are followed more rigorously	■ Staff and leadership across the organization use data to drive strategy and performance ■ New knowledge informs other programs
2 Outputs for Grantees	■ Program models and theories of change that are grounded in evidence	■ Talent and practices to support data analysis and regular review of data
1 Strategies	■ Grants ■ Peer Network ■ Customized, expert coaching	■ Group learning sessions ■ Online learning community ■ Knowledge sharing and support
∧ Nonprofits We Target	Youth organizations with promising programs, strong leadership, and a drive to excel through learning	

The section below delves more deeply into the findings across the domains of organizational capacity, and how these intersect with the outputs, interim results, and longer-term outcomes outlined in Propel*Next*'s Theory of Change.

Organizations made the biggest gains in strengthening their capacity to implement services based on codified program models.

In year one of Propel*Next*, grantees worked closely with their coaches to develop an evidence-informed program model and theory of change.

On completing the program, the average grantee had made or was making progress on developing a team responsible for implementing services based on a codified program model. While most had *not started* or were at an *early stage* of progress at the beginning of the initiative, by the end most were *progressing* or *advanced*.

By the conclusion of Propel*Next*, grantees had also made considerable progress toward one of the intended interim results of the program: integrating their theory of change into their organizational DNA. The average organization is rated as *early stage* or *progressing* on this measure after the conclusion of the program, compared to a majority that had *not yet started* or were at an *early stage* at the start of Propel*Next*.

Program Model and Theory of Change:
(● ● = Pre-Propel*Next* and ● ● = Post-Propel*Next*)

	not started (1)	early stage (2)	progressing (3)	advanced (4)

Output: We have a team responsible for implementing the theory of change

+1.74

1 — 1.50 ———————— 3.24 — 4

Output: Our services are based on a codified program model

+1.48

1 — 1.53 ———————— 3.01 — 4

Interim Result: Our theory of change is integrated into organizational DNA

+1.45

1 — 1.48 ———————— 2.93 — 4

Organizations made considerable progress in assembling and regularly reviewing meaningful data for learning and continuous improvement.

As part of Propel*Next*, grantees received funding and training to implement state-of-the-art data management systems. This enables grantees not only to track the most meaningful data, but also to share valuable information with frontline staff, management, and leadership to use on an ongoing basis.

Organizations have made measurable progress in building their capacity to collect and report meaningful data by assembling a team responsible for the data system; collecting data on their target population; and producing data reports to help staff gauge the program's effectiveness, improve results, and reduce costs. After completing the program, the average grantee organization was *progressing* or *advanced* in these areas.

A robust data management system can also contribute to interim results for grantees such as increasing access to and use of data. Organizations reported that staff, management and executive leadership increased their access to and use of data following their participation in Propel*Next*, and they were more likely to report that board meetings were data-informed. By the end of its participation in Propel*Next*, the average organization (as reported by both leaders and staff) asserted that frontline staff and management were *progressing* or at an *advanced stage* in accessing data, and at an *early stage* or *progressing* in consistently using the data to inform its operational, programmatic and strategic decisions.

Data Collection, Reporting, and Use:

(● ● = Pre-Propel*Next* and ● ● = Post-Propel*Next*)

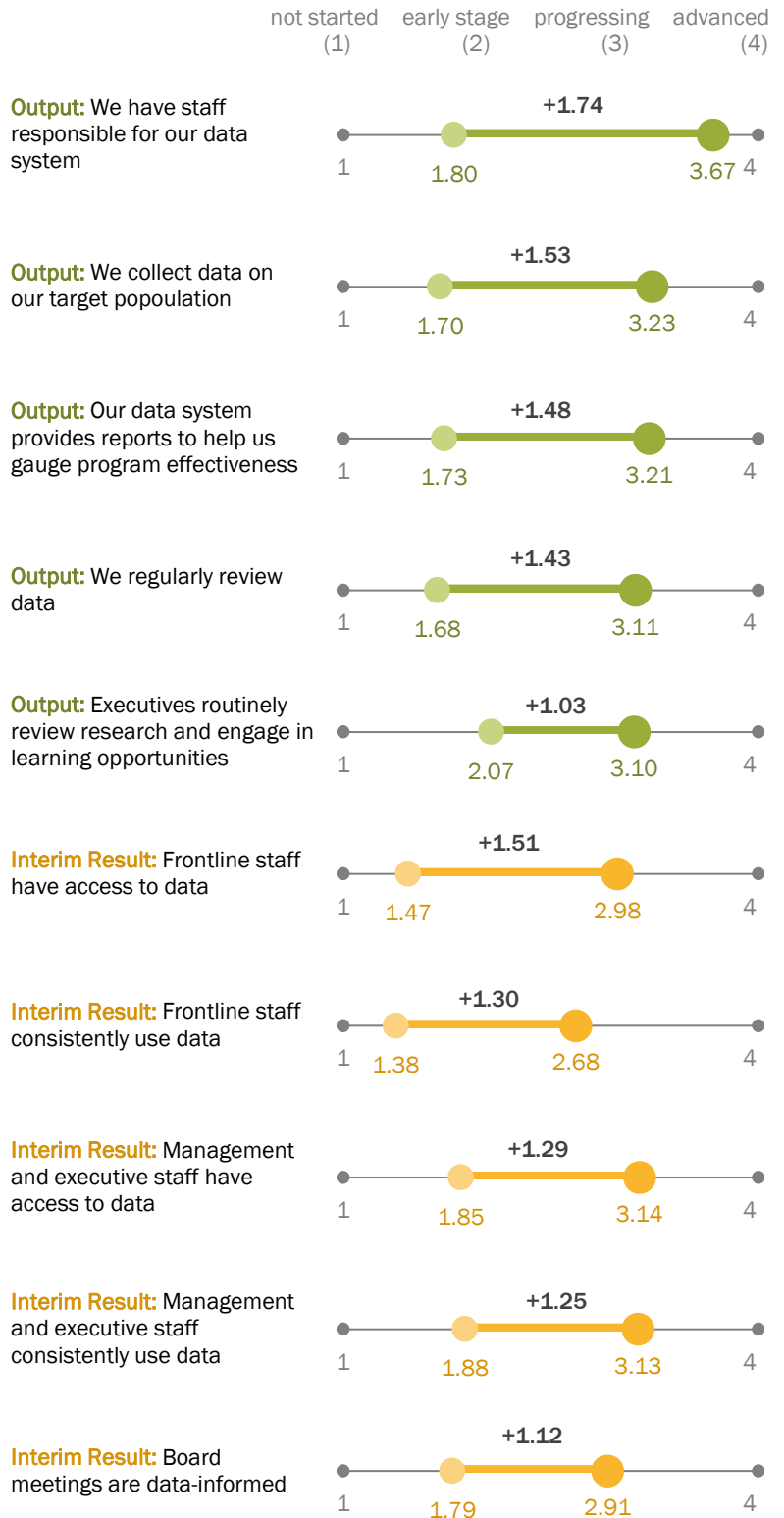|	not started (1)	early stage (2)	progressing (3)	advanced (4)

Output: We have staff responsible for our data system
+1.74 — 1: 1.80 ... 3.67 :4

Output: We collect data on our target popoulation
+1.53 — 1: 1.70 ... 3.23 :4

Output: Our data system provides reports to help us gauge program effectiveness
+1.48 — 1: 1.73 ... 3.21 :4

Output: We regularly review data
+1.43 — 1: 1.68 ... 3.11 :4

Output: Executives routinely review research and engage in learning opportunities
+1.03 — 1: 2.07 ... 3.10 :4

Interim Result: Frontline staff have access to data
+1.51 — 1: 1.47 ... 2.98 :4

Interim Result: Frontline staff consistently use data
+1.30 — 1: 1.38 ... 2.68 :4

Interim Result: Management and executive staff have access to data
+1.29 — 1: 1.85 ... 3.14 :4

Interim Result: Management and executive staff consistently use data
+1.25 — 1: 1.88 ... 3.13 :4

Interim Result: Board meetings are data-informed
+1.12 — 1: 1.79 ... 2.91 :4

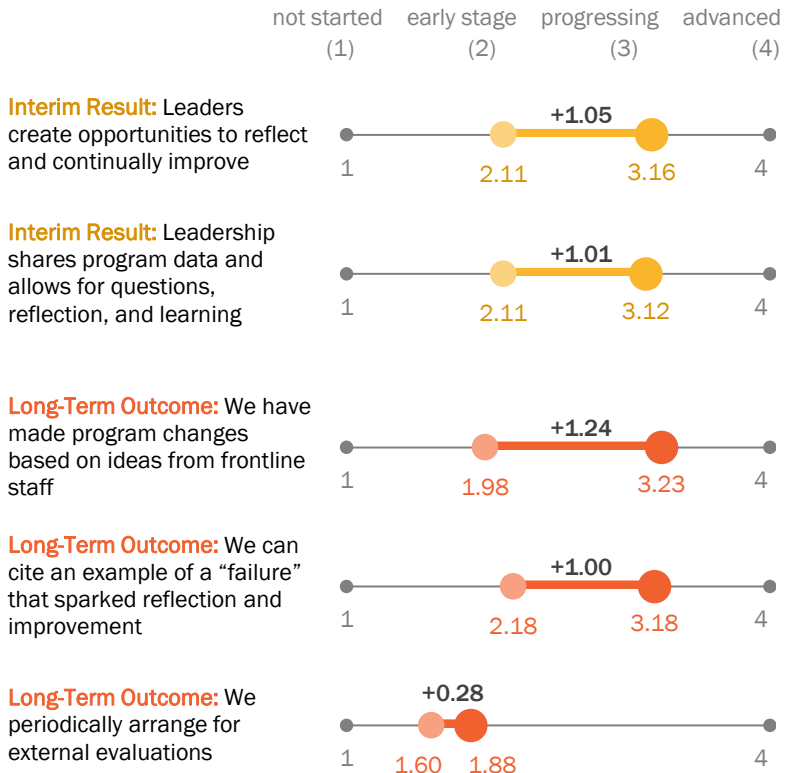## Organizations deepened their capacity for performance management throughout Propel*Next* and afterward.

Propel*Next* emphasizes the importance of building capacity for organizational learning, including listening and learning from program participants and beneficiaries, reflecting and thinking critically about the data, and engaging and empowering staff to participate in this process.

Compared to other areas, grantees were more likely to report that they had begun work and were at the *early stage* of building their organizational capacity for learning at the start of Propel*Next*. This included sharing program data with staff, creating opportunities to reflect, and making program changes based on staff feedback and learning. The average organization rated itself as *early stage* at the start of Propel*Next* and moved toward *progressing* and *advanced stage* after completing the program.

When asked about the quality of supervision and regularity of performance reviews at their organization, although many of them moved to an *advanced stage*, the rate of growth is not as dramatic compared to other indicators of development. There could be a number of reasons for this. For example, it could be that performance reviews often take place on an annual cycle and not enough time lapsed to see a shift. Another reason could be that the average ratings started off at high levels before Propel*Next* (i.e., 3.19 and 3.05), resulting in less room for growth.

Organizational Capacity for Learning:

(● ● ●= Pre-Propel*Next* and ● ● ● = Post-Propel*Next*)

| | not started (1) | early stage (2) | progressing (3) | advanced (4) |

Interim Result: Leaders create opportunities to reflect and continually improve — **+1.05** — 2.11 → 3.16

Interim Result: Leadership shares program data and allows for questions, reflection, and learning — **+1.01** — 2.11 → 3.12

Long-Term Outcome: We have made program changes based on ideas from frontline staff — **+1.24** — 1.98 → 3.23

Long-Term Outcome: We can cite an example of a "failure" that sparked reflection and improvement — **+1.00** — 2.18 → 3.18

Long-Term Outcome: We periodically arrange for external evaluations — **+0.28** — 1.60 → 1.88

Staff Development:

| | not started (1) | early stage (2) | progressing (3) | advanced (4) |

Output: My organization has "the right people in the right seats" — **+1.22** — 1.83 → 3.05

Output: Managers communicate their standards of excellence — **+1.01** — 1.97 → 3.05

Output: My organization provides responsive supervision, useful and timely feedback, and opportunities for staff development — **+.36** — 3.19 → 3.55

Output: My organization's managers regularly conduct performance reviews with all staff — **+.31** — 3.05 → 3.36
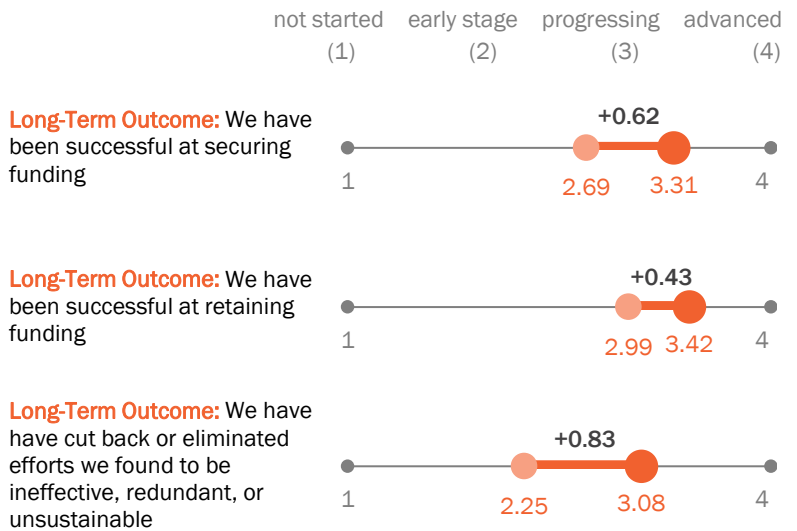
Since their participation in Propel*Next*, organizations have built on their strengths in sustainability.

Throughout the program, Propel*Next* grantees work to sustain and extend their work by retaining and attracting new sources of funding and shifting resources to effective program models.

Many grantees reported that they were in the *early stages* or *progressing* in these areas at the start of Propel*Next*. They made some progress in these areas during the program, including securing and retaining funding and cutting back efforts that were ineffective. By the end of Propel*Next*, the average organization was rated as *progressing* or *advanced* in these areas.

Sustainability:

(● = Pre-Propel*Next* and ● = Post-Propel*Next*)

	not started (1)	early stage (2)	progressing (3)	advanced (4)

Long-Term Outcome: We have been successful at securing funding

+0.62

1   2.69   3.31   4

Long-Term Outcome: We have been successful at retaining funding

+0.43

1   2.99   3.42   4

Long-Term Outcome: We have have cut back or eliminated efforts we found to be ineffective, redundant, or unsustainable

+0.83

1   2.25   3.08   4

Conclusion

Propel*Next* is designed to help nonprofits catalyze change and propel them to a higher level of performance. It is notable that the areas where the organizations made the most substantial progress are also the core areas of focus for Propel*Next*. The findings in this report are consistent with qualitative data and observations presented in previous evaluation reports that also point to grantees' considerable progress in developing a culture of learning and continuous improvement across the organization, with nearly all grantee leaders describing the program as transformative. Sustaining progress and maintaining forward momentum, however, requires work and commitment. As one leader from the California 2018 Cohort said, "This isn't something that comes to an end. This is the beginning of what lies ahead."

Methodology

The mixed methods evaluation studies conducted with the National 2015 Cohort and California 2018 Cohort incorporated a range of data collection activities including interviews, focus groups, surveys, site visits, data meeting observations, and data report reviews. The analysis presented in this report focuses on the retrospective pre–post surveys that were completed in 2017 by leaders and staff from grantees participating in the National 2015 Cohort and in 2018 by leaders and staff from the California 2018 Cohort. The questions were designed to better understand the experience of organizations both before and after their participation in Propel*Next*. The four main categories of the survey were: Program model and implementation, Data and technology, Organizational capacity for performance management, and Sustainability.

Adapted from the [Performance Practice](#) tool developed by the Leap of Reason Ambassadors Community (2017), participants were asked to rate the items in these categories along stages of development, as defined below:

- *Not started:* My organization has not started working on this.
- *Early stage:* My organization has started working on this but has made little progress to date.
- *Progressing:* My organization is making progress on this but has more to do.
- *Advanced stage:* My organization has made significant progress on this.

The survey was administered in two forms: one version was designed for grantees' leadership and the other for a range of program and frontline staff, including youth advocates and program coordinators. Some survey questions were asked of both leaders and staff, while others were directed to just one group. In the National 2015 Cohort, 36 leaders and 65 staff members from 12 organizations completed the survey. In the California 2018 Cohort, 33 leaders and 44 staff members from 14 organizations completed the survey.

This analysis examines the data from those surveys on an aggregated, organizational level rather than considering individual responses from leaders and staff. The aggregated organization rating was created by calculating a single average score for each organization based on the answers of all its respondents, and then calculating the average across all organizations. Thus, the aggregated organization rating gives equal weight to each organization, regardless of how many leaders and staff members completed the survey. This report presents the average across both cohorts.