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K-12 TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGY

WILLIAM + FLORA
Hewlett
Foundation

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INTRODUCTION

Today's students are tomorrow's voters, parents, and leaders. Even as the world around them changes rapidly, we rely on young people to make our communities vibrant, our society just, and our democracy strong. As a result, the strength of our society is measured by the opportunities and support we afford to our students, and the goals they're able to pursue.

The goal of our nation's education system should be to prepare every young person to become an engaged and thriving participant in society. We believe that if given the opportunities and resources, all learners can attain the knowledge and skills they need to define and achieve success for themselves and their communities. More importantly, in a nation marked by growing inequality, we know that public schools have the potential to help level the playing field, remove obstacles. and create opportunities for students from all walks of life.

But not long ago, the United States reached an inauspicious milestone: The number of students classified as low income reached a majority in our public schools. These same students — along with students of color and recent immigrants — are the ones we struggle to educate deeply. Historically, our education system was never designed to lead these students to success. Unfortunately, too many schools continue to fail to provide what this diverse majority needs — access to the supportive, flexible learning opportunities that will develop the knowledge, skills, and mindsets necessary to achieve their goals. Teachers lack the agency and resources they need to reach all their students, and schools are restricted in what, how, and when they can improve. Since our country works best when everyone has the chance to contribute, this waste of human potential weakens our society and democracy, leaving us less prepared to tackle the most pressing issues our nation faces today.

The Hewlett Foundation's Education Program wants to change these trends. We hope to work with educators and schools and their communities to learn what it takes to turn schools into places that empower and equip students for a lifetime of learning and to reach their full potential. Such changes will require us to support schools that value the craft of teaching and encourage students to explore their identity and have agency in their education. They entail finding and supporting leaders who are willing to transform their school systems in ways that maximize the potential of both adults and students. And they demand setting up systems that allow all of us to learn what works and what doesn't as we go along.

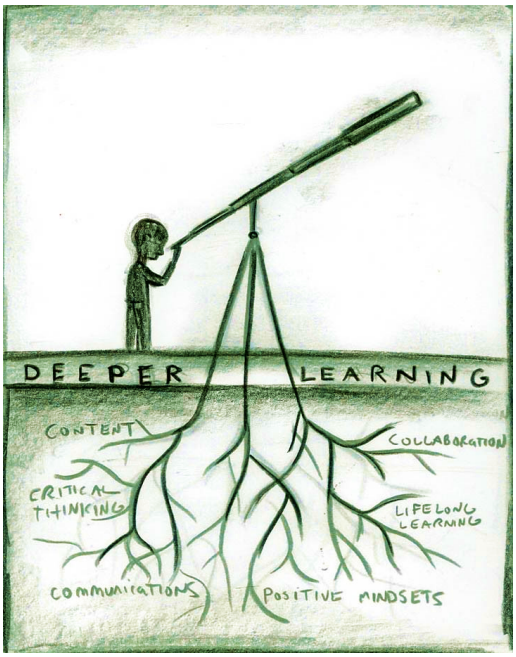
We understand that transforming schools and their ecosystems must happen in the contexts of place and identity, so we will pay attention to both as the next phase of our deeper learning strategy emerges. Our work will involve changing any number of factors at the system level, including who is involved in conversations about building more equitable, democratic schools. If we are successful in helping educators and their communities find ways to transform school systems, students from all walks of life will have meaningful opportunities to build the competencies they need to succeed. There is no one way to achieve this ambitious vision, but together we can draw from our diverse perspectives and expertise

to find, tailor, and share the most promising ideas so that every student and community benefits from this work.

WHERE WE STAND

To understand where we are today, recall where we were when the Hewlett Foundation launched the Deeper Learning strategy in 2010. At that time, the United States' education policy was just emerging from the No Child Left Behind era. In a field obsessed with testing and accountability, the idea that schools should be responsible for helping students learn how to learn, collaborate, and communicate effectively was revolutionary in itself. While some experts and educators had already concluded that we needed new, better standards — and the Common Core effort had just gotten off the ground — the nation was so focused on basic proficiency that the more fundamental quest for deep learning was underemphasized.

In retrospect, our most important decision may have been to emphasize *learning*, that is, whether students are taught in ways that prepare them for life after schooling. Mainstream reform efforts focused on new systems of teacher accountability, governance reform, and competition and choice. Arguably, all these reforms matter in bringing about the necessary systemic changes we need in our education system. Yet, few if any of these ideas for improving education were anchored in a conception of learning, especially one grounded in science. Hewlett seized upon two key developments in the field of education, fusing them with the standards movement. One was the emerging knowledge from cognitive science about how people learn, and the other was the recognition that success in 21st-century jobs and society would require a unique set of skills, abilities, and learning dispositions. The result was articulated as six deeper learning competencies:



- Mastering rigorous academic content
- Developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- Working collaboratively
- Communicating effectively, both orally and in writing
- Learning how to learn
- Developing and maintaining an academic mindset

The last decade of our work on deeper learning, therefore, has focused on defining what deeper learning means, what it looks like in practice, how it can be measured, and how effective it is in positively impacting the life trajectories of young people.

This definitional effort clarified and guided the foundation's subsequent strategic grantmaking. We supported studies to develop measures for competencies that were not readily picked up by standardized tests. We invested in new formative assessments that provided real-time data on student learning as well as repositories where educators could easily find these assessments. We backed the development of new models of classroom instruction aligned with deeper learning objectives and worked to bring high-quality materials aligned with deeper learning competencies to market. We funded the creation of tools that educators could use to make better, more informed choices about curriculum and assessment.

Our grantmaking during this period helped to accelerate important changes to the education ecosystem. The nation's assessment system shifted to one more clearly aligned with internationally competitive standards, and states aligned their curriculum with these new standards and assessments. A few ideas about teaching and learning, such as the importance of individualization, personalization, and competency-based and project-based learning, became more prominent in school improvement efforts. Scores of education innovators were motivated to show what is possible when students are engaged in these deeper learning processes.

All this activity has played out amid an ever-changing education landscape. The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, devolved authority over education policy back to the states, which represents a vast change from the No Child Left Behind era. To succeed in this new setting, we now need to consider and be sensitive to a range of policy contexts at the state and local levels. Built on the logic of standardization, our education system has always struggled to meet the needs of diverse learners, but now, a majority of students from varied backgrounds and circumstances populate our public schools. This shift in demographics means we must attend to the institutional and structural biases that inhibit diversity, equity, and inclusion, and that produce learning outcomes all too reliably correlated with factors like race and wealth. Adding to the complexity, disagreement abounds regarding the purposes our schools serve, which means contending with competing claims and theories of change and getting comfortable with the fact that different communities and actors in our education system may harbor disparate views on what is in the best interests of children.

In sizing up this initial phase of our Deeper Learning strategy, we have reached several conclusions about how our work in education reform needs to adapt. First, while standards and assessments play a role in incentivizing schools to teach to different outcomes, they provide no guarantee that corresponding shifts in teaching will ensue. We think now is the time to focus more frequently and more explicitly on practice: that is, how teachers understand their roles as educators and what teachers do in the classroom. Second, pursuing a universal strategy to advance deeper learning assumes that new standards and assessments will accrue to the benefit of all students. We have discovered that such a strategy fails to account for the implications of race, income, and language or learning differences in ensuring adequate support to learn deeply. Therefore, we think now is the time to focus even more directly on students who depend the most on our schools and who our schools have struggled the most to meaningfully educate. Third, the research and proof points we supported in the first phase of our work show the potential of deeper learning but have not provided sufficient insight into how to get a majority of schools and school systems to embrace deeper learning as central to their approach and mission. To do that, we will need to identify policies and procedures that support the adoption of

deeper learning processes and can be sewn into the fabric of our education *system*. Lastly, scaling deeper learning means getting the technical details right (e.g., aligned assessments and instructional materials), but sustainable progress is as much a sociocultural matter as a technical one. We need to do more to disrupt negative stereotypes about education and help community members become more effective advocates for the aspirations they hold for their children. We came to understand all these things during the initial phase of our work and are now ready to make several logical shifts in emphasis and strategy to more directly address the issues we found.

SHIFTING GEARS

The lessons we have gleaned from our work to date and the challenges we see in this new education landscape suggest a few important modifications to our work going forward. The shifts we contemplate are moving from:

- Emphasizing efforts to define deeper learning to helping educators acquire the knowledge and skills to improve their craft, use these tools skillfully, and expand their repertoire in schools and classrooms.
- Incubating deeper learning practices in individual classrooms and schools to spreading it within school systems.
- Helping to build policy infrastructure at the national level to building it at the state and local levels.
- Focusing an equal interest on all students to more deliberately focusing on those students furthest from opportunity.

Following this new direction will put us in better position to focus on three important objectives. Foremost is working harder to advance a vision of teaching that brings about the learning outcomes we have advocated for the past eight years. But we do not think this vision of teaching can be advanced or sustained absent work on two other fronts: identifying the conditions at the system level (i.e., supportive policies at the district and state levels) that encourage and support deeper learning; and finding out the types of support communities need to be effective advocates for the teaching and learning they want for their children. Each of these targets deserves elaboration.

Let's start with teaching. Preparing students for an ever-changing world means emphasizing critical thinking, learning to learn, and learning to work effectively with others. Building these skills has implications for both the role of schools as well as the jobs of teachers, which despite years of discussion have been slow to change. Better standards and assessments make new demands from our schools, but we are not sure that the work lives of teachers and other educators have made corresponding adjustments. Teachers often lack a level of autonomy and judgment that is part of many other professions, so we are curious about the discretion afforded them and the way in which personal accountability influences how they understand their roles and carry out their assignments. Further, professional learning opportunities that are linked both to emerging knowledge and aligned with ambitious goals, such as improving population health outcomes, exist yet are not commonplace. We

mainly see instances of such professional development among schools in the Deeper Learning Network. Therefore, we would also be curious about the learning opportunities to which teachers have access, the discretion afforded most teachers, and how this discretion influences the way they understand and carry out their assignments. Clarifying what might need to change and exploring how such adjustments might occur in more schools is a piece of the puzzle. We will look for opportunities to work with school systems willing to push for greater professionalism of teaching, and if necessary, challenge long-standing assumptions and traditions about teachers and their role in schools.

By extension, an evolving role for teachers has implications for the education workforce more broadly, especially teacher preparation, recruitment, employment, and retention. The dramatic changes in our understanding of how children develop and learn demand that new entrants to the education workforce come prepared to leverage this knowledge on behalf of their students. We are not sure how significant an investment in preparation efforts we are willing to make, but we will explore work in this area, especially if we can find exemplars or develop models that illustrate how preparation experiences give new teachers the vision, skill, and agency to help diverse learners thrive. And while we cannot tackle the full array of issues relevant to the education workforce, we might take up a few in measured fashion. For example, we will carefully examine the current teaching workforce and how it is likely to change in the years ahead. As states and school systems make decisions about how to recruit, induct, and retain new teachers, studies that can highlight emerging trends may be helpful, particularly regarding diversity, academic background, and workforce stability. Given our history of work on measurement, we also might look more closely into new ways of evaluating teacher effectiveness, especially if doing so can inform licensing and certification, and foster improvements in teacher preparation.

Regarding our education system, we have repeatedly heard that traditional teaching practices will change only when supported by school leaders. How educators understand their roles in schools is tied to how schools are structured and what incentives and supports shape their professional lives. Shifting to a focus on state and local policy infrastructure will position us to more directly explore the types of district-level changes that might be needed to support the new roles teachers are being called upon to play. We predict, for instance, that in the context of helping students master challenging academic content, teachers will be asked to pay much more attention to student engagement and motivation than in the past. To do so, they will need more support in understanding what factors inside and outside the classroom affect engagement. A related set of policies, such as attendance, discipline, and student assignment, are likely to figure prominently in how well teachers handle their new responsibilities.

More broadly, decisions related to curriculum, the schedule, and the calendar, as well as the work students are asked to perform, all matter a lot. We are very interested in understanding how the thoughtful consideration of changes in these and other policies might improve the context of teaching and foster better learning outcomes for students. One lesson from our work to date is that changes in many of these policies and practices made a big difference for teachers and students. But these changes mostly occurred as exceptions to school and system norms rather than by design.

Finally, we must focus on incorporating community concerns and interests. In many conversations with our grantees and partners during our strategy refresh process, we heard that the lack of attention to

community needs and preferences inhibited even the best plans for improvement. Others told us that constructive pressure for change might come from communities. To date, we have not explored how community interests and support might help in advancing new conceptions about teaching and learning, but now we must do so. In terms of our work going forward, we will assist efforts that elicit the voices of students, parents, and others in communities that our schools serve. Initial reconnaissance suggests that parents and community representatives, including business leaders, all are strong advocates for deeper learning competencies. They are not confused about whether their children or future employees need to think analytically, work well in teams, adapt to new challenges and problems, and work effectively with new facts and information. But their influence has yet to be leveraged in advancing systemic solutions to the shifts in teaching and learning that will help children acquire these skills and competencies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK MOVING FORWARD

Giving greater attention to teaching and the system changes and community supports associated with this approach will impact our current strategies. We have reached a number of conclusions about what we need to do differently.

One conclusion is that a still undetermined portion of our work should focus on specific contexts or places. Getting closer to the factors we seek to understand and possibly alter requires working, we think, at the level of the school district and the communities they serve. We are not naïve about the complexities associated with doing so and are prepared to adjust as we go along. But we believe that focusing on specific places will allow us to grasp, address, and influence the multiple factors needed to facilitate effective learning at scale.

Work that is national in scope will continue. Frankly, we hope that *everything* we support turns out to be nationally significant. That said, we have a particular interest in backing national efforts that leverage the place-specific work we do. Around the nation, people have distinct voices and stories, all of which need to be heard. Of similar benefit are shared lessons from the field. By working nationally, we can add substantively to the discourse about education in this country and use what we learn in our place-based work to help others make bolder moves on behalf of students.

Another conclusion we have reached is that our efforts must include evolving the roles of teachers and other educators, so they can better help students master academic content and acquire an appreciation for life in a democracy. Though we still need to work out exactly how we will engage teachers in this work, we have already had some success spreading ideas among the ranks of teachers. As we go along and see which best practices surface, we will figure out how to share them with practitioners and with those who set policy and regulation for schools.

We also have come to realize that our work is substantially about adding to the field's knowledge about instructional improvement and system change. We will look for partners willing to tackle difficult endeavors and take measured risks on behalf of students. When possible and appropriate, we will study and evaluate the work of our grantees; such a method is key to determining if we picked the right problems to work on and the correct approaches.

Additionally, now is the time to seek closer connections between our agenda in teaching and learning and our long-standing work in open educational resources (OER). These connections are already being made — especially in our efforts to develop openly licensed, high-quality instructional materials — so the more we can do to cultivate and support them, the better. Beyond this, we see opportunities to help teachers use OER, and in the process, enhance their own practice. In various ways, we will look for opportunities to foster the use of OER as a means to improve teaching. Similarly, we will look for opportunities to improve open pedagogy so that these resources make a bigger difference for students.

WHAT WE HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH

Although we characterize this new work as "emergent," we have strong hunches about where to begin and how to enter. Moreover, we have a clear mind about the goals we hope to see in the short term. The following are the areas in which we will concentrate our efforts.

1. New Exemplars of Teacher Practice

Many teachers see themselves as facilitators of student learning — these teachers are skilled at organizing instruction so that students learn not just content but also social and academic skills and an appreciation for life in a complex democracy. While we see such teachers in the Deeper Learning Network, today's education system does not widely support this method of teaching. Many more teachers who might like to educate in this manner lack the necessary backing and assistance.

To facilitate these enhanced forms of teaching, we may seek out and document schools and systems that already explore different approaches to instructional improvement and empower their teachers to deepen their own practice. Our work may include supporting teacher preparation programs to better inculcate deeper learning skills and pedagogy in their experiences. Our path likely means attending to how school systems build the capacity of teachers, particularly early career teachers, to work with students from diverse backgrounds and with a range of learning differences. To promote deeper

learning outcomes, especially for students furthest from opportunity, we will need to learn how to use capacity building, other levers for instructional practice, and better assessments and tools.

Specific actions we might take, especially in the context of our place-focused work, include establishing district policies that incorporate new supports to alter the role of teachers in ways that improve teaching and learning among students. Another example is creating models in teacher education that utilize partnerships with school districts, especially ones that take explicit advantage of emerging knowledge about how people learn and develop.

An early marker of our success might take the form of better guidance for teachers on how to improve instruction through the implementation of high quality curriculum. Another might be new and innovative models of teacher preparation. Another indicator of success may be the introduction of stronger teacher induction and mentoring systems.

2. New Knowledge About Transforming Education Systems

The last decade of work in education reform has largely focused on change at the school level, which will always be necessary. But reformers and researchers have paid considerably less attention to the problem of how to help systems spread and support best practices in all schools. Consequently, we have not learned enough about system change at a time when many experts now agree that a key hurdle to broad improvement rests within the system itself. In addition to helping school systems explore new structures and processes for improving instruction, we have a strong interest in studying these efforts and sharing what is learned. In an initial effort to develop our knowledge, we recently funded a series of partnerships between practitioners and researchers. We will look to do more of this kind of work but also explore a range of ways to accelerate the process of improvement at the system level.

For us, the existence of one or more networks of school districts engaged in transformative work (e.g., curriculum redesign, new schedules, new approaches to the use of time and to measuring learning) would represent initial successes. Similarly, early indicators of progress might include networks developing and supporting individuals in leadership roles (or those who aspire to such roles) who are inclusive, diverse, and actively working to mitigate the impact of race and class in our education system.

3. New Voices in Our Discourse About Public Education

Many of the country's recent social movements have been fueled by young people, often using new technology, who are fed up with the inability of adults in the system to keep them safe, secure their livelihoods, and address issues of shared social and environmental concern. Student activism is a bright spot for our country, standing in stark contrast to the apathy and disenfranchisement too many students still experience at their schools.

We know from research and experience that when students feel listened to — when they see school as responsive to their needs and learning as relevant to their lives — outcomes improve. Therefore, we think elevating student voices is a starting point: encouraging adults to listen authentically to students,

supporting students to use their voices responsibly, and creating school systems and cultures capable of changing in response to student participation. Practically speaking, initial efforts might include supporting new channels for student feedback and experimenting with new modes of school governance. We would be thrilled to see schools and districts incorporate student voices in local and national dialogues and eliminate practices and policies that unfairly punish certain groups of students, instead replacing these with stimulating learning experiences that challenge students to apply knowledge in real-world settings.

Additionally, we do not think that the voice of teachers has been clearly heard, especially on matters of teaching and learning. A starting point of reform would be to give teachers a greater say in the direction of their classrooms and schools, which likely would include shaping policies, distributing leadership and fostering a productive culture, and helping choose high-quality curricula and materials, including OER and associated supports. In fact, a sign of progress in our work would be to observe that in contexts where teachers are held in regard and enjoy latitude, student learning outcomes improve.

Regarding parents and their students, we've seen that when members of the community share in developing a vision for what education should look like, everyone within the system works together toward their shared aims in a more productive fashion. Similarly, we have also seen how organized, informed communities can bring productive pressure for school systems to change, especially when it comes to matters of equity and inclusion. We hope that by seeding community voices, at the same time we pursue system reform, we can cultivate a productive balance of inside-out and outside-in forces for change.

4. New Conversations about Teaching & Learning

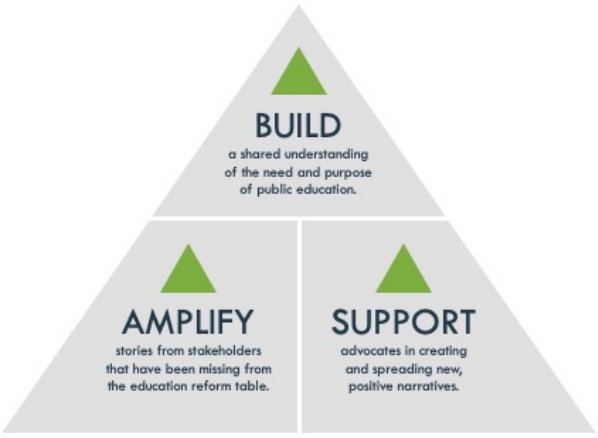
If we can add new voices to the discourse, we can also generate and amplify new stories about learning, and by extension, the role of public schools in society. Given the current conversation, an effort to add more constructive and informed debate seems timely. Here is a sampling of findings from our recent communications research:

- Education leaders and professionals define "success" in ways that do not resonate with their communities. Families often value life skills, interpersonal skills, and real-world preparation over test scores or honors classes.
- Negative stereotypes about education abound, inhibiting progress at all levels.
- When a student doesn't succeed in school, society views this as the individual's failure, with little weight given to system-level shortcomings. Paradoxically, this opinion holds true even when the system also is viewed as failing.
- The voices of teachers, students, parents, and communities are missing from important conversations about education. If harnessed, their opinions could give rise to a strong demand for reform.

- Widespread mistrust of education jargon exists, including many of the acronyms and shorthand phrases used to talk about high-quality learning.[1]
- Some students, particularly students of color and low-income students, are expected both explicitly and implicitly to do worse than their white or higher-income peers. Such expectations lead to stereotyping students in ways that negatively affect their performance.

These findings shed light on our current culture of schooling and confirm that, as a country, we must work to ensure our schools are understood and supported as centers for learning. Listening carefully to teachers, students, and parents, and equipping them with what they need to share their stories will be key to finding our way through these cultural issues.

Interestingly, one lesson from the 1983 "Nation at Risk" report and its aftermath is that intentional leadership and action are necessary to socialize broad narratives about the education system. As an early move, we are studying stories from students, parents, and teachers along with other narrative-shifting activities to understand what a creative mix of investments might entail. Developing and disseminating stories that highlight the broader purpose of education in a democracy is particularly urgent, given tepid public support and continued erosion of the idea of education as a public good.



Over the next several years, we hope to build an understanding of the space based on what we hear and learn from new stakeholders, and we will consider grantmaking that helps students and parents from families of color and low-income families use their own words and narratives to describe student success. Of course, new messengers and seasoned advocates alike need to be thinking about how to share their stories, preferably cooperatively. Sharing stories is one aspect of work we are considering where the interplay of national and place-based investments might be mutually reinforcing, especially if work we support in specific local contexts provides clear evidence of promising systemic change models. Part of the challenge is finding ways to use research, campaigns, and strategic communications to lift up these families' voices and share their lessons.

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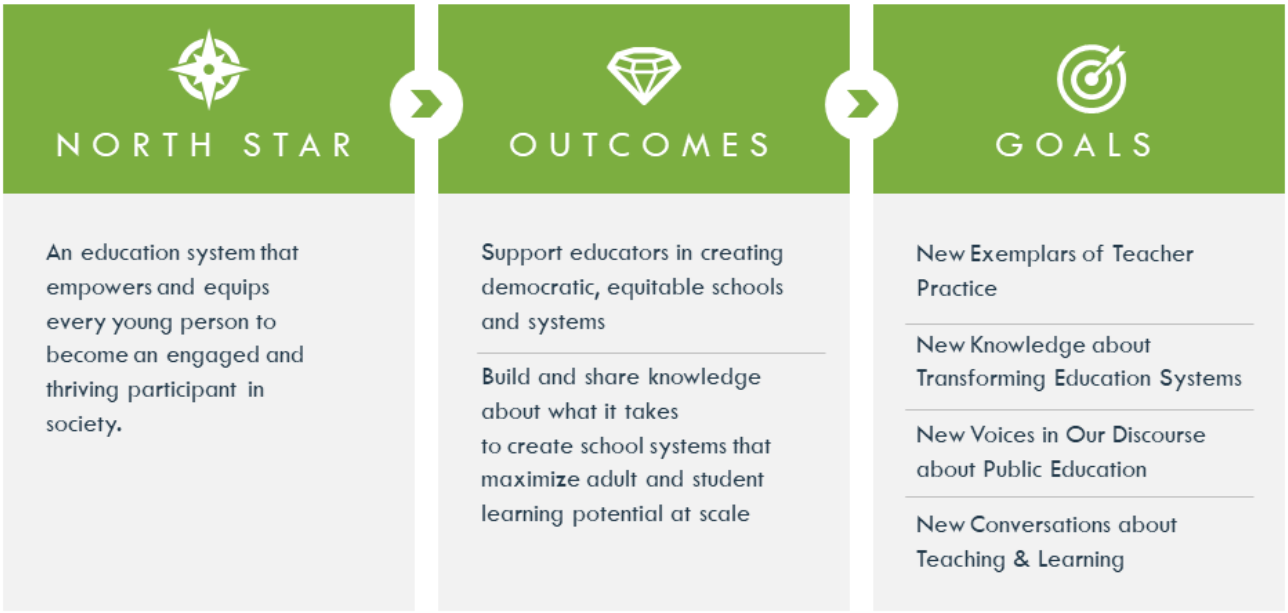
[1] This includes our own term *deeper learning*, which we learned can be off-putting to our partners. As one grantee noted, "People already doing the work who could be your best advocates don't see themselves in the definition." Going forward, we will use the term more sparingly and only when it's helpful.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Our team remains committed to the long-term goal Hewlett established eight years ago. Noting changes in context, we have identified new challenges on the path to preparing all young people to become engaged, thriving participants in society. The shifts in strategy we have described represent our best current thinking about how to meet these challenges. Deciding to emphasize specific places as a part of our work going forward will help us shape the challenges in ways that fit the resources at our disposal. This emphasis also will help us illustrate and share what it will take to help students furthest from opportunity learn deeply.



We have characterized this new work as emergent, which means that while we have made a number of decisions about emphasis and focus, our strategies will be further elaborated over time. At the moment, to outline some of the steps ahead. we will spend the next six to eight months looking into and narrowing the sample of places where we might work on the geographically focused and/or context-specific part of our teaching and learning portfolio. As we refine our criteria, we will begin the process of getting to know these places and affording opportunities for these places to get to know us. The evolution of work that is decidedly national in scope will also take place during 2019. Our interests in improving the practice of teaching and leadership will benefit from reconnaissance and efforts to mount inquiries that might inform new investments later. And we still have several questions, for instance, how to shift into work focused on community and educator voices, and we may engage in some early exploratory work along these lines. We will certainly report on these moves as we make them so that our grantees and the field in general is well informed about what we are doing and the progress we are making.

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