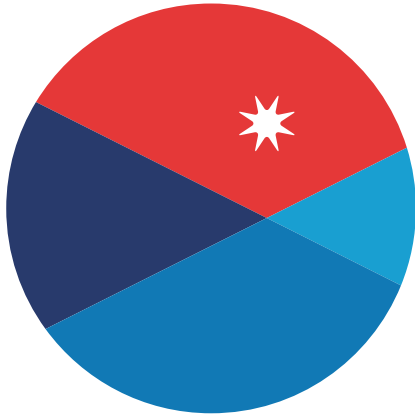




PARTNERSHIP
FOR THE
FUTURE *of*
LEARNING

Building a Beloved Community for Action

**Strengthening Public Education
Through Funder–Field Collaboration:
A Retrospective on the Partnership
for the Future of Learning**

October 2026

About the Partnership for the Future of Learning

Initiated in 2012, the Partnership for the Future of Learning grew from a small working group of funders into a national network that involved more than 800 education and social justice leaders from 425 organizations, including 25 foundations. Over its lifespan, it served as connective tissue across a fragmented field, bringing together organizers, advocates, researchers, educators, students, communicators, union and systems leaders, and funders around a shared commitment to a racially just, equitable, and high-quality public education system. Together, partners co-created an affirmative vision for public schools, crafted strategy and engaged in collaborative learning, built relationships across lines of difference, and developed resources that continue to shape policy, narrative, and practice. Along the way, staff and partners experienced first-hand the challenges of sustaining and growing a broad and diverse network while also navigating internal and external pressures. The Partnership closed in 2026, but its work is carried forward by the field it helped to build.

For more information about the Partnership and the resources produced by the network, visit: <https://futureforlearning.org/>

Acknowledgments

Editorial guidance on this report was provided by Cyrus Driver and Evelyn Aissa, founding and final executive directors, respectively, whose close knowledge of the Partnership for the Future of Learning shaped every section. We are grateful to the staff, consultants, and partners who built and engaged in the network over the many years of its work, and hope this report does justice to their experiences and contributions. We are deeply indebted to the 20 interviewees—staff, Steering Committee members, and partners—who sat in conversation, sharing what they knew and what they wondered about, and bringing both honesty and care to the task of reflecting on the Partnership’s work and impact.

By its nature, a network is held differently by each person who passes through it, and no single account can capture it fully. We have tried to offer as full a reflection as possible, with an eye toward what will be most instructive for future network-builders. A special thank you to Warren Simmons and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation for providing financial support for this retrospective, to the Stuart Foundation for funding its design and production, and to Roberta Furger, Steering Committee Chair, and Kavitha Mediratta, Strategy Advisor to the Partnership, for drafting the report. We are also grateful to Susan Cahn and Amber Hu for their close review, and to Okey Nestor and his team at okeyco for designing it. Finally, we acknowledge the foresight and leadership of Jeannie Oakes and Susan Sandler, two education justice champions who were instrumental in launching the Partnership and whose lives and influence continue to inspire so many of us.

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Introduction

In early 2018, roughly 30 organizations in the Partnership for the Future of Learning came together to build what became the *Community Schools Playbook: A Practical Guide to Advancing Community Schools Strategies*. The effort exemplified the collaboration at the core of the Partnership's purpose and theory of change. At the time, community schools were a well-known strategy in public education. New York City was several years into a mayoral initiative to spread the model throughout the City's five boroughs. Oakland, with its history of deep community-school relationships, was rolling out a districtwide strategy, as were districts across the state. The model was catching fire, with a growing number of funders expressing interest. But many of the actors working to scale community schools were not in consistent conversation or relationship with one another, and the Partnership aimed to help bridge these gaps while providing new resources and momentum for this promising, equity-focused strategy.

Between 2016 and 2026, the Partnership for the Future of Learning built an enduring national network of public education players around a shared commitment to equity, deeper learning, justice, and democratic renewal in public schools. This report documents why it formed, how it worked, and what it accomplished and leaves behind.

The collaborative work of creating the Playbook brought together actors from across the field. The Learning Policy Institute anchored the research in partnership with the National Education Policy Center, and the Coalition for Community Schools brought practitioner networks that had been building local models for decades. Organizing groups—affiliates of the Center for Popular Democracy, Journey for Justice, Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, and others across the country—worked alongside national teachers' unions and policy researchers to shape the content and the frame. The Public Leadership Institute provided infrastructure to support sustained collaboration. A smaller group of organizations engaged deeply, with others signing on to the final product. The process involved a level of facilitated coordination that is uncommon among actors accustomed to working in parallel, rather than together.

The result of this collaborative effort is an influential tool that still circulates, guiding implementation of community schools in districts and states across the country. Perhaps more importantly, by aligning groups around a shared priority, and creating space for thoughtful partnership, the effort also catalyzed new relationships and opportunities that extend well beyond the initial product. In this way, the Playbook reflects the Partnership's core premise: that bringing diverse public education stakeholders into authentic and sustained relationship creates the opportunity for more powerful strategy, tools, and action than any single organization can advance on its own. The Partnership called this approach "connecting, aligning, and producing"—a cycle of relationship building, shared strategy, and collaborative output that defined how the network worked.

The Partnership’s work—along with the values, theory of change, and commitment to learning and adapting that guided it—is the subject of this report. The reflections that follow draw on historical documents and the experiences of individuals who built and participated in the Partnership’s work in various ways and at different points in the network’s life. As a broadly held network, there is no single story of its work and impact. That said, the observations and lessons in this report are grounded in the perspectives of 20 interviewees, including staff, Steering Committee members, funders, labor leaders, and field partners involved in national and state research, advocacy, technical assistance, and youth, family, and community organizing.

Their insights suggest a set of themes that cut across the Partnership’s work, among them:

- 1. A broad-based, cross-sector network rooted in democratic principles of participation can add significant value by creating a relational infrastructure through which to shift current policy and drive future change.**
- 2. Leveraging the different perspectives, priorities, and expectations of a diverse network depends on ongoing, open navigation of those differences, and careful attention to balancing process and outcomes along the way.**
- 3. Engaging philanthropy alongside other public education advocates requires authentic co-creation of visions and strategies and must address inherent power dynamics between funders and field partners.**
- 4. Advancing a thriving and just system of public education in a time of growing threat demands a shared commitment from both field and funders to “hold the whole” of the system, lifting their gaze beyond the immediate interests of any organization or strategy and sustaining attention and resources over the long term.**

The sections that follow trace these themes through the Partnership’s founding choices, its programmatic work and accomplishments, and the challenges it grappled with throughout its life. Our hope is that the Partnership’s experience will ignite future philanthropic and field conversations, inform efforts to prioritize this kind of cross-sector collaboration, and support new networks to emerge.

Origins

The idea for the Partnership began in 2012 with a small group of funders participating in the National Public Education Support Fund in Washington, D.C. A subset of this group convened as the New Models Working Group to discuss how to build a national movement that would offer an affirmative vision for public education. Their starting point was a simple and yet profoundly difficult question: what would it look like to build a movement that both highlighted the public good that public schools serve and laid out a values-based vision of transforming them to better serve their local communities and the country?

The starting point was a simple yet profoundly difficult question: What would it look like to build a movement that both highlighted the public good that public schools serve and laid out a values-based vision of how schools could be transformed to better serve their local communities and the nation?

The funders in the New Models Working Group were not a random sample of education philanthropy. They were among its leaders.ⁱ Several had deep roots in community organizing and social movements that shaped a set of foundational beliefs: (1) education change required attention to power as much as policy; (2) the field needed a forward-looking vision of educational equity in addition to a defense against ongoing attacks on public education; and (3) the voices most essential to transforming public education were the ones least likely to be at a funder-convened table. Reflecting on what distinguished this cohort from their peers, a longtime partner and Steering Committee member recalled that most funders were far more drawn to technical problems than social, cultural, and political ones—and this group was a deliberate exception to that pattern.

Against that backdrop, these donors envisioned an agenda rooted deeply in the needs, hopes, and aspirations of local school communities, one that would strengthen public education as a public good, rather than accelerate its fragmentation through market-oriented approaches. The group articulated this shared agenda in a founding document, *Updating American Public Education: Keeping the Foundation While Preparing for the Future*, which upheld the values of equity, democracy, trust in the professional judgment of educators, and student-centered deeper learning approaches.

The group's strategy for implementation started with an effort to change the dominant narrative for public education by reframing how its challenges and potential solutions were understood. They hoped to support a new story about public education that lifted up the importance of public schools and envisioned their transformation to be more equitable and responsive to what students, families, and leading research on teaching and learning said was important. They sought to pair this vision with the power to advance it. To do so, they realized, they needed a space where field leaders could be genuine participants in shaping that vision, alongside—rather than downstream from—funders.

The “launch-phase partners” reflected the funders’ desire for deep collaboration. Participants included leading policy, union, organizing, and systems-change groups in the public education and policy advocacy fields.ⁱⁱ They were invited to be co-designers and co-learners. The first initiative, *Shared Story*, focused on building a shared affirmative narrative about public education for the field. At a time when narrative and storytelling were rarely central to education advocacy strategy, leading with this work was an important signal of the Partnership’s distinct approach. The project became a crucial proving ground for what shared learning and co-design could produce when the differences of ideology, strategy, and identity present in the room were acknowledged and debated, rather than ignored or smoothed over. These conversations eventually crystallized an animating language and vision for the network—racially just, equitable public systems—that threaded through the Partnership’s work going forward.

Four elements of this founding period proved consequential across the life of the Partnership. The first was the sequencing—vision and strategy developed among funders before a broad cross-section of field partners came fully into the conversation. The second was the emphasis on public education stakeholders (researchers, advocacy and organizing groups, educator unions), with less representation of individuals and organizations deeply rooted in teaching and learning, such as school-level practitioners and state or district leaders. The third was the approach to funding: rather than a traditional donor-advised pooled fund, funders pursued a combination of aligned grantmaking and direct funding to partners, with some regranteeing through the Partnership itself. And lastly, Partnership leadership made the decision early on (in 2016) to organize as a network.

Each of these choices had a profound impact on the structure, focus, and viability of the Partnership. The first enabled a sharp articulation of the educational vision before the table expanded. The second tapped into energy and power already present in the advocacy field. The third created flexibility to move quickly and opportunistically as work developed. The network model, for its part, enabled the Partnership to catalyze and benefit from the energy and expertise of a broad cross-section of organizations and individuals.

Each choice also carried costs that would surface over time. While the initial foundation conveners shared a view of what they hoped to see in public education, their vision for how the effort would be organized and operate was less clear. When the conversation expanded to include others in the field, many ideas surfaced for how to pursue the shared commitment of strengthening public education, though fewer centered teaching and learning directly. People and organizations came to the effort for different things: a learning space, a funder-field bridge, a coalition for collective action, a place to wrestle with hard truths, and a source of relationships that could outlast any one project. The decision to pursue aligned grantmaking made the effort vulnerable to shifting expectations within funding institutions—including the pressure to demonstrate impact on

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timelines that were difficult to meet. And the choice to adopt a network model left an ongoing uncertainty about how to characterize the Partnership's work honestly and effectively without overclaiming credit or undermining the essential role of partners.

As the founding executive director recalled, the Partnership's launch as a network brought into relief a tension around origins and implementation that would persist throughout its life. The strategy and decisions from those formative conversations among the original funders and partners needed to be mapped onto the Partnership's democratic aspirations, and the distance between them needed to be continually negotiated. The balance between process, reflection, and action was likewise difficult to strike. Recurring questions about purpose arose across the network's life. At their core, these were questions about whose vision the Partnership was built to serve and what it meant to actualize its mission. The Partnership's aim of serving many interests and needs was both its greatest strength and its most persistent challenge.



Partners gathered in Chicago for the 2019 Network Assembly. Photo: Jenni Kotting.

The Partnership for the Future of Learning: A Timeline

2012	The <i>New Models Working Group</i> forms as an offshoot of the Education Funders Strategy Group, convened by the National Public Education Support Fund (NPESF). Funders include the Ford Foundation, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Sandler Foundation, Southern Education Foundation, Stuart Foundation, and William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.
2013-15	Funders articulate their shared vision and values, <i>Updating American Public Education: Keeping the Foundation—While Preparing for the Future</i> , and commission an initial framework to guide implementation. The first staff are hired, and an advisory group of field partners is convened to inform the strategy.
2016-17	The Partnership officially launches with <i>Shared Story</i> as its first field-facing initiative, followed by <i>Shared Policy</i> and <i>Key Places</i> (a fourth strand, <i>Shared Systems</i> , follows later). A Steering Committee of funders and field leaders is established as the formal governance body of the network, alongside a 50-member Strategy Council to foster field input on priorities. <i>Key Places</i> investments begin in California, Georgia, and New Hampshire (and continue through 2020). Network participation grows to about 250, and the first network Assembly convenes.
2018-19	Partner work groups launch on Community Schools, Teaching Professions, and Education Resourcing. The <i>Community Schools Playbook</i> is published, followed by an animated explainer video, story map, finance brief, and website.
2020-22	The COVID-19 pandemic forces a suspension of in-person gatherings until 2022. Attacks on public education accelerate. Over an 18-month period, the Partnership transitions from NPESF to Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, while releasing two new tools— <i>Building a Strong and Diverse Teaching Profession Playbook</i> and <i>Truth in Our Classrooms Bridges Divides: A Messaging Guide</i> —in deep collaboration with partners. The first evaluation of the Partnership finds strong evidence of deeper field connection and alignment across the network.
2022-23	A year-long <i>Strategy Regeneration</i> engages 165 partners in setting network priorities for the post-pandemic era, leading to a broader, field-focused network strategy: <i>Breakthrough for Public Education</i> . Network Assemblies resume and the <i>Truth in Education Funding</i> web resource on school privatization is launched.
2024-25	The Partnership responds to intensifying threats to public education through network-wide coordination calls, rapid-response communications, and a suite of action tools to protect educational equity, access, and civil rights. Network membership grows exponentially, reaching 425 organizations and 800 individuals, but the network and partners face existential challenges as the funding for equity-focused public education advocacy contracts sharply.
2026	The Partnership sunsets. Its tools and resources are shared with the field, and remaining funds are directed to partner organizations continuing key dimensions of the work.

Strategies and Evolution

Over its 14 years, the Partnership grew from a small funder working group into a national network of more than 800 members from over 425 organizations, including 25 foundations. Its strategy evolved in phases:

Phase I, Strategy Strands: The founding framework organized work around three interlocking goals: changing the national conversation about public education, advancing a shared policy agenda, and supporting communities in shifting practices, models, and policies. By 2017, roughly 250 partners were participating in the Partnership’s strategy strands—*Shared Story*, *Shared Policy*, and *Key Places*—through in-person quarterly meetings and more frequent small-group convenings. The first Network Assembly convened in Oakland, CA, bringing the full array of partners together in person at the scale the network had been building toward. At the Assembly, the Steering Committee broadened to include field partners, reflecting the founding donors’ commitment to shared governance, followed later by the creation of a 50-member Strategy Council to provide broad field input on Partnership priorities.

Phase II, Issue Workgroups: By 2018, the Partnership had produced narrative guidance and shared policy priorities, and the question became how to act on them. The Partnership launched workgroups on three issues: (1) advancing community schools, (2) strengthening and diversifying the teaching profession and broader educator workforce, and (3) equitable and adequate education resourcing. These workgroups, which aimed to integrate narrative, policy, and practice, along with the Partnership’s now four strategy strands (*Shared Systems* having been added), were the backbone of the network for the next 4 years.

Phase III, Reflection Followed by Field-wide Activation: In 2022, in response to pandemic-related disruptions, the Partnership launched a year-long *Strategy Regeneration* process that engaged 165 of its partners in redefining priorities going forward. The *Breakthrough for Public Education* initiative emerged from this process, marking the evolution from a workgroup-based strategy toward a more expansive, field-wide approach to network engagement. This field-wide approach accelerated in the aftermath of the 2024 elections, as the Partnership mobilized rapid-response communications, network-wide coordination calls, and tools for partner action in response to intensifying threats to public education.

This section explores the programmatic work and emerging theory of change and how the network evolved in response to a shifting national context. It begins with a closer look at the signature efforts that shaped the network’s theory of change in practice.

The Partnership's Shifting Approach Over Time



Shared Story and the Learning Space

When asked what they most value of the Partnership experience, many partners involved in the founding period return to *Shared Story* and the excitement of sitting in learning conversations with people doing different kinds of work toward a shared end. A senior leader of a national education organization who came into the Partnership through *Shared Story* in 2016 describes the experience as unlike anything else he had been part of in the education field. The premise that funders and organizers and national advocacy groups might learn from one another in a peer relationship—rather than a hierarchical, transactional one—was radical. “The configuration of the Partnership seemed a little unique, and I liked the idea of bringing together activists and national groups and funders in a conversation that was more equal than usual, or at least attempting, aspiring to be.”

This space was created with deep intentionality.

Staff and consultants who designed the original convenings describe a process that surfaced different perspectives on narrative and resisted flattening disagreement toward premature resolution. Equity was part of the national language of public education at the time, but an explicit articulation of racial and gender justice was less common in philanthropy. Creating time and space for the racial and gender tensions to be aired in the conversation established the Partnership as a place for real conversation. It also changed how the Partnership saw its work, foregrounding racial justice in its vision of equity and centering those most affected by inequitable systems. Over time, these exchanges produced a trust and shared understanding that became the substrate on which everything else was built.

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Community Schools and Network Activation

In 2018, building on *Shared Story* and a *shared policy framework* developed in partnership with the Learning Policy Institute, the Partnership launched working groups to support collective action among partners. Community schools presented a unique opportunity for network activation: partner organizations like the Coalition for Community Schools had years of experience in this issue, momentum was building in cities across the country, and the research base was strong.ⁱⁱⁱ The Partnership’s *Community Schools Playbook*, whose development was anchored by the Coalition for Community Schools, the Learning Policy Institute, the National Education Policy Center, and the Public Leadership Institute, became a central tool in spreading community schools nationally. The goal, as a longtime partner and Steering Committee member recalls, was to create “alignment and then opportunities to act,” taking an idea that had gained traction in a handful of places and curating the learning and expertise of the broader field to develop the language and the tools to propel more work forward.

A senior labor leader at the National Education Association (NEA) describes a moment in 2019 when it felt like “lightning struck in multiple places at once” and community schools became the reform focus of the day.^{iv} The California Partnership for the Future of Learning, which grew out of the network’s *Key Places* strategy described below, became a leading voice for community schools in the state during the pandemic. Education administrators in other states were also turning to the model. New philanthropic resources were flowing to support the work and, in 2021, the Biden administration made community schools a signature federal investment. While these developments were not directly caused by the Partnership, all of them were influenced by the relational and narrative infrastructure the Partnership had been building, which made it possible for different partners to see themselves as part of the same story and to amplify rather than compete with one another.^v

SCALING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

The Community Schools Playbook was developed with 28 partners and launched with educator engagement across California, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York City, and elsewhere. By December 2021, it had received approximately 37,000 unique visitors and more than 5,200 downloads, with 10,000 print copies distributed, and had influenced policy actions by the Biden administration and states and localities.

Key Places: The Bidirectional Flow of Policy and Practice

The *Key Places* strategy was built on a belief that national narrative and policy work needed to be in conversation with the places where the work was happening. California, New Hampshire, and Georgia were selected as initial sites because multiple types of partners were actively engaged on the ground and participating funders already had investments in these states. The intent was bidirectional, as a New Hampshire partner explained. Local expertise informed and shaped national priorities and, in turn, the national network “affirmed our strategies, connected our vision to a wider national one, inspired the ways we collaborated, and supported us in creating strategic content well beyond what we could have produced on our own.”^{vi}

In California, the co-leads of the California Partnership observed how the national network’s energy enabled local groups to “move from largely tactical conversations to long-term strategizing and aligned collaborations,” ultimately winning \$7 billion of state investments in community schools and teacher effectiveness and recruitment, which has culminated in a permanent, \$1 billion annual investment to expand community schools. In New Hampshire, cross-sector activation defeated the most aggressive voucher legislation in the country and produced a novel, community-driven strategic plan for the state’s most diverse school district. In Georgia, community schools became a counter-organizing tool for advocates fighting a state takeover of low-performing schools. The *Community Schools Playbook* and national policy framework provided language and supported partners, helping state advocates hold the line against takeover legislation while building longer-term organizing capacity. As a senior foundation leader who supported the Georgia work recalled, “There was a moment when there were resources and tools that you could plug and play that allowed you to speed up and strengthen your own efforts to play both offense and defense.”

Assemblies: The Beloved Community in Practice

If the playbooks and workgroups were the muscle that propelled the Partnership’s strategic output, in-person gatherings and especially the Network Assemblies were its heart. Partners across the network described a generous reciprocity in the experience in which the national organization asked only for authentic and enthusiastic participation and gave back considerably, including access to funders, connection to peers doing parallel work in other states, and an informal resource bank of people who would “pick up the phone.” Many observed the inspiration and energy they drew from being in a room where the work felt larger than any one organization’s agenda.

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—New Hampshire partner

Assemblies enabled everyone to see each other across issue, place, position, and strategy, reducing isolation and sparking new ideas and relationships that developed in ways that no one could have planned. So much of this stemmed from how the gatherings were organized. As a newer partner recalled, participants were purposefully invited into a shared story of the network's history and purpose in which everyone's voice was important. A longtime labor partner and senior union leader found the network to be "far less hierarchical than most other networks in terms of who could be in it and who could speak... [W]hile that's extremely difficult to sustain, it was really valuable."

The Assembly was also where the Partnership operationalized its commitment to the practice of meaningful participation and collective discussion of hard issues. The 2023 Assembly centered a dialogue on charter schools, grappling with one of the field's most enduring fault lines, one that has undermined the ability of education advocates to mount a unified defense of public education. A longtime Steering Committee member who co-facilitated the dialogue observed that the Partnership's ability to hold the conversation was evidence of what years of trust building had made possible. "The question was always how far you could bend before something broke, and the Assembly showed there was enough trust that the network could bend without breaking."

An Emerging Theory of Change

The work described above was the process by which a theory of change emerged, rather than the rollout of a fully formed one. Each of these efforts taught the network important lessons about what moved people and what could move the broader field:

- **Trust and relationship-building have to precede action.**
- **Shared learning can foster new connections and understandings.**
- **For tools to be effective, shared ownership matters as much as the tools themselves.**
- **The work must be woven together and rooted in a diversity of places to take hold.**

Through its work, the Partnership also gained clarity on the kind of staffing, meeting design, facilitation skills, and infrastructure required to turn relationships into action.

These lessons built on the decision to organize as a network. In contrast to coalitions or movements organized around a focal demand, the Partnership was intentionally designed to be broad and to hold a multiplicity of perspectives and needs. The founding conviction—and the big bet—was that sustained democratic process, grounded in shared values and genuine relationship across difference, would produce the kind of field alignment that a centrally directed strategy cannot, and would, over time, expand the field's capacity to strengthen and transform public education. The network's role was to build the conditions—shared language, trusted relationships, and aligned strategy—that made it possible for partners (a term deliberately chosen) to act more powerfully within their own arenas. The Partnership called this its CAP framework: *connecting, aligning, and producing* with and in support of partners.^{vii}

This theory of change and CAP framework embodied an orientation toward contributing to a larger whole rather than claiming credit for it—an orientation that, while essential, ran counter to the norms of most funder–grantee relationships. As a former Partnership executive director explains: “The whole point of the network was to create a space where we could elevate the work of partners and help them connect. It was not designed to be about us as a network. That’s what made it valuable for partners.”

But this orientation also created challenges in attributing impact. If the mechanism for change is the relationships and the space, or “container,” the network created to hold them, then the impact will always show up elsewhere—in what people do when they leave the room: in the campaigns they run, the coalitions they trust enough to join, and the individuals and organizations they call. While funders and many partners pressed for evidence of policy and practice results, the reality is that a diffuse, indirect impact is inherent in a network theory of change. Nonetheless, the downstream effects of the Partnership’s work were profound. Some were clear gains in policy or changes in practice. Others, such as new relationships or understandings, were harder to quantify but no less impactful.

The Partnership’s founding conviction was that sustained democratic process, grounded in shared values and genuine relationship across difference, would produce the kind of field alignment that a centrally directed strategy cannot.

A Network Under Pressure

The Partnership’s work unfolded against a backdrop of compounding disruption in the years between its founding and sunset. The first Trump administration in 2017 brought the first major test of the Partnership’s capacity to engage in volatile and highly contentious times. The pandemic in 2020 brought a second. The surge of culture war attacks on curriculum and local school boards in 2021 brought a third. Running beneath these currents were slower-moving shifts in the philanthropic landscape as several longtime education funders transitioned to other roles and others, including some supporting the Partnership, gradually withdrew from the kind of broad, systems-level equity work the Partnership represented. New education funders, often focused on more targeted and/or technical solutions, tended to be less aligned with the network and its core purpose. Adding to the funding pressures, some saw the Partnership as too progressive in its priorities or as overly focused on process.

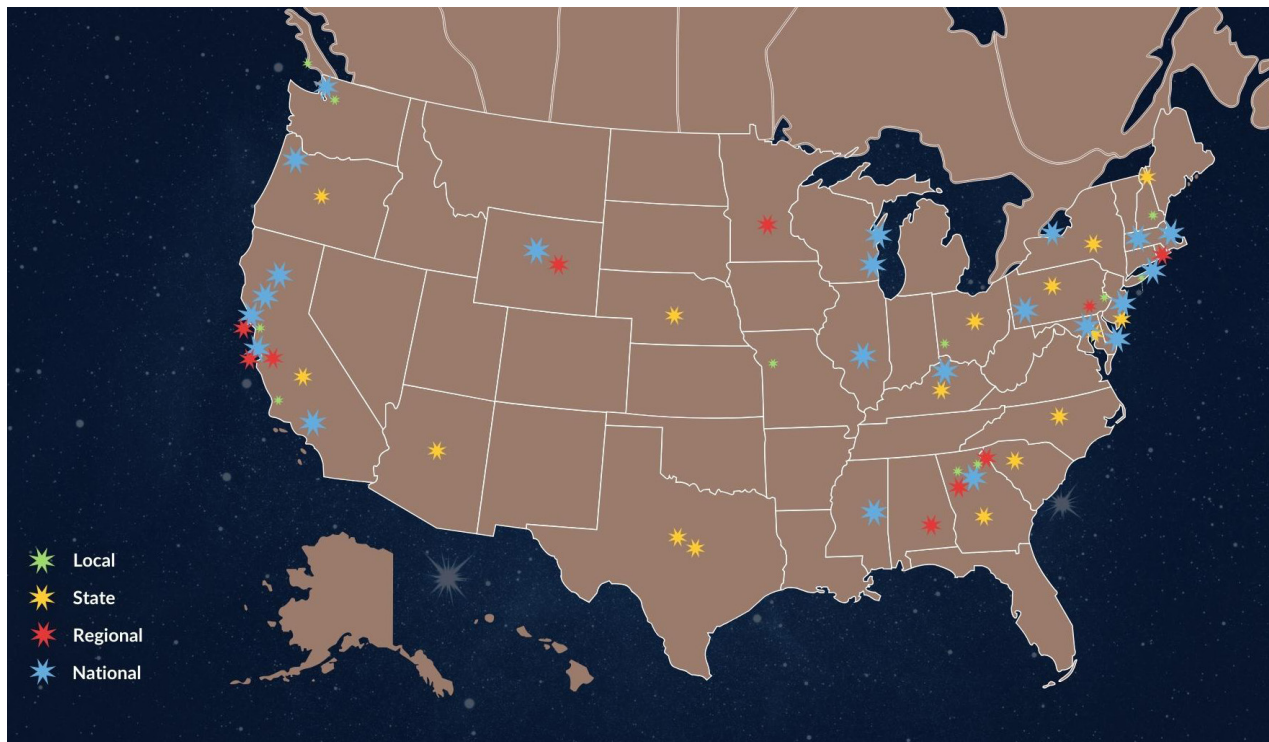
Like many organizations at the time, the Partnership also grappled with a persistent gap between funding and ambition. Its small team faced questions of organizational structure and fiscal home and how to right-size activities to the moment without sufficient resources, leading to a reliance on consultants in the absence of enough staff. While the particulars of the experience were unique to the Partnership, the broader challenges were faced by many organizations across the field in this period.

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A 2-year pause in in-person gatherings during the pandemic required the Partnership to adapt its collaborative model to virtual engagement, removing what staff described as the network's "heartbeat." The Partnership's issue workgroups moved online and grappled with the pandemic's implications for education. The Teaching Profession workgroup produced the *Building a Strong and Diverse Teaching Profession Playbook* and the Education Resourcing workgroup focused on leveraging the pandemic-related financial disruption and American Rescue Plan Act funding to advance equitable funding for public schools.

Over the same period, the Partnership released *Truth in Our Classrooms Bridges Divides: A Messaging Guide* to support partner action against the critical race theory backlash at the time. It convened *StoryCircle*, a group of communications and narrative change leaders who met to align strategies as the landscape shifted, and it worked with the Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE) and others to engage high school youth as narrative ambassadors for equity and learning in public schools. It also brought its capacities to bear on emerging coalitions pushing back against the attacks on public schools, providing extensive narrative support to the national H.E.A.L. Together coalition.



The Partnership's Strategy Regeneration process engaged 165 partners from across the network in advising on strategy and structure. *Graphic: Jenni Kotting, Caitlin Martin.*

In 2022, recognizing the need to adjust to shifting conditions, the Partnership launched a year-long *Strategy Regeneration* process that engaged 165 partners in advising on the strategy, structure, and function of the network's next phase. The result was the *Breakthrough for Public Education* initiative, launched in 2023 to mobilize broader action across the field. That same year, the Partnership resumed networkwide gatherings, centering dialogue on charter schools alongside the unveiling of the *Truth in Education Funding* online compendium of resources to help partners understand school vouchers and advocate for equitable, effective investment in public education. Staff describe this post-pandemic period as marked by a certainty of purpose, forcefulness in voice, and the kind of partner engagement that earlier phases had been building toward.

Yet the philanthropic contraction was accelerating, not only for the Partnership but for the field overall. Funding for public education advocacy severely declined in 2023 and 2024, forcing organizations to cut staff, narrow their work, or close entirely. For a network whose work and outputs depended on the volunteer efforts of its partners, this was an existential pressure. Although even those with fewer resources kept showing up, the founding executive director observed, "The soil was losing its fertilization."

Funding for public education advocacy severely declined in 2023 and 2024, jeopardizing the work of both the Partnership and the broader field. For a network whose work and outputs depended on the volunteer efforts of its partners, this was an existential pressure. Although even those with less resources kept showing up, staff observed, "The soil was losing its fertilization."

Following the presidential election in 2024, the Partnership ramped up public communications, providing breaking news alerts and resources for partner action. It launched the *Trump Administration Play-By-Play* explainer tool in early 2025 to help partners make sense of the new administration's priorities and expanded its network-wide shared learning opportunities through regular coordination calls and a suite of tools for local, state, and national action, including an online directory to help partners connect directly. But funders who might once have rallied around this work were no longer active or had stepped back with questions about how the Partnership fit with their strategies. The Partnership's public voice was clear. Its values were unwavering. Its partners were engaged. And yet it confronted a gap between ambition and capacity that ultimately could not be closed.

Legacies

Over 14 years, the Partnership attracted and directly moved \$20 million in foundation resources toward its goal of activating field-wide collective action for a stronger system of public education. Its work helped catalyze considerably more investment and contributed to policy wins in districts and states while building new relational infrastructure, high-impact tools, deeper capacity and connectivity in places, and a distinctive practice of participatory, values-based community building. In the Partnership's final message to the network, the executive director reflected on these legacies. She wrote:

“The field, and our public schools, are stronger because of what this network built together: a high-trust, cross-sector community; field-shaping collaborative resources; place-based efforts that continue to advance community-driven change; and narrative and convening infrastructure that helped align strategy across story, policy, and systems. And perhaps most enduring of all are the relationships formed through this work, and our collective commitment to public education as a public good and a foundation of a strong, inclusive democracy.”

A Relational Infrastructure

The web of relationships built across people and organizations is one of the Partnership's most significant and enduring contributions. This multi-role “relational infrastructure,” extending across policy, research, organizing, and advocacy, did not exist in the education landscape in 2012 and remains rare in education even today. But it successfully expanded the capacity of all its partners and catalyzed new work and partnerships, while increasing funders' knowledge of the field and advocates' access to each other and to grant makers. Looking back on this achievement, a member of the Partnership staff expressed the hope for “previously disconnected bigger national organizations and more grassroots folks” to carry forward the instinct to stay in conversation, “whether or not they say, ‘I learned this from the Partnership for the Future of Learning.’”

A Set of Highly Impactful Tools

The Partnership's tools—the *Community Schools Playbook*, the *Building a Strong and Diverse Teaching Profession Playbook*, the *Framework for Strengthening Public Education*, and the narrative guidance on shared story, critical race theory, civic education, and artificial intelligence—contain invaluable insights. In addition, they are living records of a shared and participatory learning process among a diverse group of organizations with different institutional interests, different theories of change, and, in some cases, different positions on contested questions—and a reminder of why such a process matters. The organizations that contributed to the *Community Schools Playbook*, for example, found new ways to advance their strategy because they worked together and created something that reflected their individual and collective work, knowledge, and expertise. The value of these tools is tied to how they were made, with intentionality and commitment to partner input.

A Deepened Capacity and Connectivity in Places

The Partnership's place-based work left behind a deepened capacity for collaboration, not only in the places where the network invested most deeply but also among emerging coalitions in the public education landscape. In California, Georgia, and New Hampshire, partners achieved landmark victories for public education: defeating privatization efforts, winning major public investments in community schools, and building coalitions and frameworks that continue to influence state and local policy. Beyond these wins, the Partnership also fostered a shift in how local partners understood their relationship to each other and to national strategy and supported new coalitions to emerge in the post-pandemic era.

A Deeply Collaborative Way of Holding People

Threading across all these contributions is the horizontal and deeply humanistic way in which the Partnership held people and organizations, creating a space where all voices were valued. At its best, the Partnership built a practice of democratic relationship grounded in a deep respect and caring for each other that stood out as being unique and energizing. A California Partnership co-lead reflected: "It's not just the shared vision around public education, but it's the *how*—that deep belief that if we bring people together, we can transform ourselves and our communities." For many, the Partnership was one of the few spaces in the field where that belief went beyond rhetoric to actual practice, where a foundation president and a local community organizer could find themselves in genuine dialogue, with each holding the same weight in the room.

"It's not just the shared vision around public education, but it's the *how*—that deep belief that if we bring people together, we can transform ourselves and our communities." —California partner



Photo: Ki Marie Film.

Insights and Lessons

The Partnership was, from the outset, highly experimental in its approach to mobilizing the field in support of public education, and its small staff team held a commitment to learning and adapting along the way. In doing so, its journey offers insights and practices we hope will be instructive to those seeking to create networks in the future. The lessons that follow draw on both the successes and the things interviewees wished had been done differently or done sooner, returning to the themes surfaced in the introduction.

1. Approach the funder–field relationship directly and honestly.

Bringing funders and the field into meaningful relationship was among the Partnership's most compelling and challenging goals. Despite the commitment to funder–field parity, the pull of deeply grooved habits in these relationships is enormously difficult to overcome, and the power asymmetry of this relationship was never fully surfaced or resolved given the Partnership and partners' dependency on funder support. Future networks need to name this dynamic explicitly from the outset—including the ways in which funders' agenda-setting power shapes what feels possible, even in nominally democratic spaces—and build structural ways for countering it.

2. Build the relational space with as much care as the content.

The Partnership excelled at building a high-quality relational space for its network. It did this by intentionally designing open, caring, and participatory forums for partner engagement, from network assemblies and coordination calls to collaborative processes for developing tools and defining policy priorities. This container, and the relational infrastructure it produced, was the conduit for action in the broader field. Building it required two things that are easy to overlook and underinvest in. The first is the physical and logistical conditions that make genuine relationships possible. While virtual engagement can sustain a network between meetings, it cannot replace the intimacy and trust-building that in-person gatherings generate. The second is the facilitation skill to name and hold tension, making room for dialogue, reflection, and learning that might support new understandings to emerge and positions to shift. Networks that treat such engagement as ancillary rather than core will not build the relational depth that makes long-term coordinated action possible.

3. Invest in the practice of democracy and balance process with action.

The push/pull relationship between building real ownership through a careful, inclusive process and the pressure to demonstrate results on policy and practice was a recurring tension in the Partnership's work. The Partnership showed what it looks like to practice democracy as a living commitment in the non-hierarchical spaces it created and the choice to face hard conversations when the network was strong enough to hold them. Yet living into a democratic vision also requires balancing process and action, ensuring timely conversations produce clear outputs and don't "sag underneath their own weight," as a Steering Committee member put it. Sustaining that balance also depends on investment in staff capacity at the network and partner levels to carry out the facilitation and enactment that this work requires.

4. Name the purpose and theory of change—and keep naming them.

The Partnership's multiplicity of perspectives and deliberately porous partner category were a deeply energizing source of exchange and belonging and also caused confusion about purpose and boundaries. Partners across research, organizing, advocacy, and philanthropy found in the network a rare space for cross-sector learning and relationship that most had not encountered anywhere else. But clarity about a network's purpose—both visionary and operational—is essential for participants to understand what they are coming into and the value gained from their engagement. Staff faced the challenge of partners expecting the network to be all things to all people and becoming frustrated when the network did not deliver. The Partnership's experience suggests that holding such a large and diverse group of partners requires regular articulation and explicit revisiting of both purpose and theory of change as the network and environment evolve so that partners joining in different moments and phases share a common understanding about how they might act together.

5. Be deliberate about membership and what it takes to support participation.

The question of who makes up the field and whose voices shape its priorities was frequently surfaced and never fully resolved. In many ways, the Partnership was a network of organizations, and those closest to the classroom and teaching and learning were less involved. Conversations among partners tended to focus on policy and advocacy more than teaching and learning strategies. Daytime meeting schedules made educator, student, and family participation structurally difficult, as did the uneven resources and time that grassroots organizations working with these constituencies had available to support their participation. Future networks will face the same tradeoffs of breadth versus depth and inclusivity versus strategic coherence and must design carefully to meet the specific needs of their members. Surfacing these tradeoffs early on can help to avoid gaps in participation and strategy downstream.

6. Expect the attribution problem and build for it anyway.

The difficulty of demonstrating impact was perhaps the Partnership's most structurally intractable challenge. As a labor leader observed: "We never had a *but for* sentence." Adding to this was an institutional humility and reticence to claim credit for outcomes that many organizations contributed to, and funding and capacity that were not sufficient to build the communications and data collection infrastructure that might have told the Partnership's story more compellingly. Networks must grapple with what it means to tell that story, however imperfectly, from the beginning: collecting data on introductions that led to grants, tracking narrative shifts, documenting the spread of shared language into policy and practice, and so on. While this kind of evidence may not satisfy everyone, it is inherent to this theory of change, and taking time to articulate and communicate this impact is an essential part of the work.

7. Commit to long-term funding.

And finally, it is important to remember that the community schools story took years from the first *Shared Story* convenings to the moment of lightning striking in multiple places at once. The relational infrastructure that made that moment possible was built over extensive convenings, workgroups, and place-based work. Funders who want to support this kind of change need to balance the pull of short-term goals against the need for long-term structural initiatives that cross issues. This requires a willingness to invest on a timeframe that most philanthropic institutions currently do not commit to—and to hold that commitment through the transitions, strategic pivots, and shifts in the broader context of politics and policymaking that are a natural feature of network life and the work itself. Funders will need to make that case within their own institutions, and future networks will need to be close partners with funders in making it, both to other funders as well as the broader field.



Photo: Ki Marie Film.

Reflections

The Partnership for the Future of Learning was an experiment in an ambitious proposition: that bringing together a diversity of perspectives and investing in shared learning would build the trust and relationships needed to align the field and strengthen public education. The community schools story, the Assembly culture, the decade of building narrative infrastructure and the cross-sector relationships that energized local work speak to the power of the Partnership experience and its potential for long-lasting impact.

Looking forward, the question now is whether and how others will step in, and whether field and funders together can create the conditions for new growth to sprout—weeds and all—alongside the understandable desire for urgent action. The Partnership's sunset coincides with, and in some ways accelerates, a broader contraction of the relational infrastructure of the public education field as other adjacent networks and coalitions have gone dormant or closed alongside it. Without this connective tissue, there is considerable risk of reversion to the fragmentation of earlier eras at precisely the moment when public education and other public institutions need broad-based, democratically grounded engagement. The stakes are enormous: this period of social, economic, and political upheaval will either produce institutions that serve the diverse needs of a just multiracial democracy or deepen the historical patterns of exclusion and inequity that the Partnership spent over a decade working to undo.

The urgency that drove the founding of the Partnership is even more acute now than in 2012 when the New Models Working Group formed. The young activists who came to the Partnership in its final years offer a reminder of what that urgency demands. For state policy advocates from Texas who joined the network's last Assembly, the most impactful moments were the ones that brought them into rooms with people doing different work in different places—hearing about the voucher fight in Arizona, connecting with students facing parallel challenges in other cities, learning together about AI and ed tech in ways that “weren’t necessarily me teaching someone, or someone teaching me, but let’s get together and see what we can find out.” That is what the next network will need to build. The Partnership's story suggests that meeting this urgency will require more than resources and strategy. It will require patience to build trust and relationship across difference; a commitment on the part of the field and funders alike to “holding the whole,” above and beyond organizational priorities; and a growing muscle among philanthropy to take the long view this work demands, even amidst pressure to show short-term impact.

Endnotes

ⁱ Members of the New Models Working Group were presidents, executive directors, heads of family foundations, or directors of the education programs of major global foundations, and nearly all had held senior leadership roles across the education and philanthropic sectors. These included: Jeannie Oakes, Director of Educational Opportunity and Scholarship Programs, Ford Foundation; Barbara Chow, Education Program Director, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; Dan Leeds, Founder, and Terri Shuck, Executive Director, National Public Education Support Fund; Nick Donohue, President and CEO, Nellie Mae Education Foundation; Susan Sandler, Co-Chair, Sandler Foundation; Kent McGuire, President and CEO, Southern Education Foundation; and Christy Pichel, President, Stuart Foundation; among others.

ⁱⁱ Launch Partners included representatives from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA), the Learning Policy Institute, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Public Leadership Institute, Frameworks Institute, Center for Innovation in Education, National Education Policy Center, and Center for Popular Democracy, among a handful of others.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Coalition for Community Schools had been building the infrastructure for network activation on community schools over several decades, with a national network of practitioners, local model builders, and policy advocacy at the national level, and the National Education Policy Center brought relationships with grassroots groups. The AFT and NEA had institutional commitment and scale. Organizing groups had local community school campaigns and deep community relationships.

^{iv} The Partnership benefited from a key development in the early phase of the network: the decision to fold in an aligned network of researchers and philanthropies called the Education Justice Network, which some of the same donors had seeded in parallel to the Partnership and other field networks. Its members included the Schott Foundation for Public Education, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE, which predated the Learning Policy Institute), the National Education Policy Center, and the Southern Education Foundation. Integrating the two efforts under the banner of the Partnership brought researchers into the network who had deep relationships with organizing groups in the field and an orientation toward action and practitioner-oriented research that accelerated the Partnership's work, including the development of the Playbooks.

^v A longtime partner and former Education Justice Network member recalls: "We were intentionally trying to make [lightning strike in multiple places at once]. It wasn't an act of God. Rather, many, many intentional small acts of communication, coordination, respect, and action. We each stayed in our lanes—practitioners deep in the work raised the need for research first, then researchers did the research and then handed it to advocates to create the playbook and activists to lobby. We kept talking to each other, amplifying each other's publications and activities but honored the expertise we all brought to the table. The fact that the first step was listening to the people implementing community schools in the field and that the research was shaped to answer their questions is why the subsequent tools were so powerful."

^{vi} The Partnership's [*Key Places Strategy Refresh: Final Report*](#) describes work in each site. For more on the ongoing work in California, see the [*California Partnership for the Future of Learning*](#).

^{vii} See Madeleine Taylor's 2014 analysis, [*Connecting to Change the World*](#). In the connecting phase of network growth, members exchange information and build trust. In the alignment phase, members capitalize on their connections to discover, explore, and define goals, strategies, and opportunities that they share. As they do this, connections deepen, and their appetite grows for taking collective action related to what they align around. In the production phase, members organize to take joint action. Organizing production adds new dimensions to members' relationships, since they must go through the process of agreeing on, designing, and implementing projects. This requires members to make decisions and commitments that are far more demanding and consequential than connecting and aligning.

