

MARCH 2021

# KEY PLACES STRATEGY REFRESH

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## Final Report

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Partnership for the Future of Learning



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## Executive Summary

In October 2020, the Partnership for the Future of Learning launched a Key Places strategy refresh to assess the evolution and impact of the strategy during the first five years of its implementation, and to co-construct a refreshed approach with network partners. The strategies that shape today's Key Places, Shared Policy, and Shared Story strands were "Launch Phase Strategies." Five years into implementation, with a network of nearly 700 members from over 300 organizations and 20 foundations, the Partnership has launched. Network members have built strong collaborative muscles together and feel uniquely connected to each other and to the network's long-term vision of racially just, equitable public education systems. At the same time, the broader national context has changed immeasurably.

**The findings of this strategy refresh underscore the continued value of a network strategy grounded in place.** Interviewees emphasized Partnership contributions to the work in Key Places, as well as Key Place contributions to other states and the national network. The findings also point to the importance of viewing this refresh as a part of a larger remodeling of the network, leveraging learning from five years of implementation to think strategically about how to fully maximize the power of the network - in this moment, and well beyond.

*Key Findings for Advancing a Remodeled Place-Based Approach*

1. Without exception, interviewees emphasized the importance of continuing to ground the national network in a place-based strategy.
2. National, funder, and to a lesser extent, Key Places partners, emphasized the importance of moving from an emergent strategy to a deliberate and focused one.
3. There was broad agreement that the strategy must be 'opened up' to a greater number of places. Coupled with a *low, medium, and high touch approach* to supporting the place-based partners' efforts and sharing learning and practices across the network, the strategy would also be aligned with the capacity of the national team and resources.
4. There was clear agreement about two criteria for place-based partners going forward: partners should continue to be aligned with the national network's values and practices and centering of racial justice and equity; and, the strategy should be driven by place-based interest in collaboration. Interviews revealed an unresolved tension between opening the strategy up wide with minimal or no further criteria, versus some continuation of a "gatekeeping function," by maintaining additional criteria.
5. Interviewees imagined this wider place-based strategy as part of a larger remodeling of the national network, reassessing distinctions between the Shared Systems and Key Places work - and, possibly Shared Policy and Shared Story, too.
6. Partners across all vantage points emphasized that places should be driving the substance of the learning across the network and that all of its strategy strands and structures should be intentionally built in support of that. They also emphasized that further grounding the national network in places going forward is essential to its credibility, traction, and deep relationship-building.
7. Interviewees shared a wide range of thoughts in response to the prompt, "Is a funding stream a prerequisite for a Key Place?" However, without exception, they were clear that some form of dedicated coordination support for the network's place-based work should continue.

## Background

The Partnership for the Future of Learning is a diverse national network of nearly 700 individuals from 300 organizations and 20 foundations, all working to strengthen and renovate public education. Beginning as a funder working group within the National Public Education Support Fund in 2015, the Partnership has since evolved into a powerful network uniquely characterized by its members' deep sense of shared values, commitment to shared governance, and strong collaborative learning muscles. Members share a commitment to protecting public education as a public good and to remodeling public education to advance racial equity and engage students in meaningful learning.

At the outset, the Partnership network executed a set of interrelated launch-phase strategies - Key Places, Shared Policy, and Shared Story, all integral to promoting policies to strengthen public education and change the dominant narrative about our systems of education. Together, the network's strategy strands support the movement of the network's three priorities: advancing a community schools strategy, equitable and adequate education resourcing, and a strengthened and diversified teaching profession.

The Key Places Strategy Refresh Launch Memo provides background on the impetus for the refresh as well as the origins of the Key Places strategy. The Partnership launched the strategy refresh in October 2020 with three goals:

- Build and facilitate a collaborative process to answer a series of Guiding Questions (see Appendix A).
- Together with its partners, co-construct a refreshed Key Places strategy, weaving it together with the other strategy strands and ensuring that the relationships between Key Places, Shared Systems, Shared Story, and Shared Policy are clearly defined.
- Map out the objectives and activities for the launching of the refreshed Key Places strategy potentially in the Fiscal Year 2022.

To answer these questions, a systematic and collaborative six-month process was used to hone key questions to answer through the refresh and then conduct in-depth interviews of 22 partners (see Appendix B) with representation from all three Key Places, national partners, funders, and [ORGANIZATION NAME] staff and consultants (henceforth referred to as the "national team"). The interviews provided space for candid sharing of lessons learned, naming of opportunities for strengthening and/or recalibrating the strategy, and gathering reflections on the most strategic and powerful route forward. Importantly, a resounding theme emerged early on in the interviews: to maximize the influence of the Partnership's work going forward, the strategy refresh needs to be a part of the Partnership's broader regeneration planning. This report presents the findings from the refresh process and offers a series of recommendations for how the Partnership can leverage them throughout regeneration planning to strengthen its strategy and aligned actions and growth going forward.

# Major Key Place Impacts

## California

### State Context

- California represents an advanced education policy landscape in many ways, including the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF); the Calif. School Dashboard, a multiple-measure school accountability and continuous improvement tool; and an English Learner Roadmap.
- The state is home to some of the strongest community-centered, equity-driven organizing on the continent. These groups have a long history of collaboration among themselves and with advocacy and research allies. The philanthropic community is also vast, with strong, though intermittent, support for organizing.
- The 2013 passage of LCFF marked a historic victory for the students, families, organizers, and advocates who worked together for nearly two decades to secure it. LCFF advances a public education system more grounded in the values of local, democratic decision-making and equitable funding.
- Despite passage of Proposition 30, which increased revenue for education, the state's schools continue to be woefully under-resourced. In addition, LCFF requirements for intra-district equity and inclusive decision-making are far from fully implemented.

### Partner Reflections on the Role of the National Partnership

- Reflecting on the impact of the Key Places strategy on the CA work, Key Places, national and funder interviewees emphasized that launching the [Partner Organization] grounded advocates in the national network's long-term vision and shared values and created, as a Key Place partner put it, "a space for something new to be built out of something that had been in existence for a long time." CA partners were able to move from largely "tactical kinds of conversations" to long-term strategizing and aligned collaborations still connected to current policy goals and opportunities. As a result, CA-based funders, some of whom had begun to recede from the work, also began to significantly re-engage. CA partners were then positioned to extend deep collaborative relationships to move a range of work, including a highly effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Increased Capacity

[REDACTED]

## Impact on Policy & Practice

[REDACTED]

## Georgia

### State Context

- In 2016, Georgia educators and families defeated the Opportunity School District (OSD) ballot initiative, a victory that stood out as one of the few wins for public education in the elections that year. To defeat the proposed state take over of low performing schools, Georgians formed a new coalition, [ORGANIZATION NAME], that brought together a diverse set of community leaders, teacher organizations, advocacy groups, unions, and other pro-public education actors for the first time. Their ability to energize a multi-racial base of rural and urban voters around a common cause was instrumental to their success, as was their articulation of an affirmative vision to public education.
- Following the OSD defeat, the coalition rebranded as [ORGANIZATION NAME] and shifted to advancing a community schools strategy.
- In 2017, Georgia's First Priority Act created a new mechanism for a more community-centered and non-punitive "school turnaround" approach, even amid a very conservative political context.
- Georgia's education philanthropy has historically provided scarce support for community organizing and within education has provided extensive support for school choice efforts.

### Partner Reflections on the Role of the National Partnership

- Georgia Key Places partners' reflections on the role of the national Partnership in their work emphasized communications and strategy support, access to national policy leaders, and connection to a clear affirmative vision.
- The national Partnership team and policy partners were instrumental in providing the technical assistance, framechecks, and 'on call' strategic support to strengthen the coalition's forward momentum. These collaborations with the national Partnership, coupled with significant regranting of national foundation funding for the work, paved the way for a remarkable narrative shift in Georgia from 'state takeovers of failing schools,' to a Whole Child approach through community schools that centers community needs, assets, and voices.

### Increased Capacity

[REDACTED]

## Impact on Policy & Practice

[REDACTED]

## New Hampshire

### State Context

- Since 2014, New Hampshire educators, advocates, and community members have been demonstrating fundamental changes to teaching and learning, and offering lessons in how to sustain the change process amidst the pendulum swings of politics.
- New Hampshire's [Performance Assessment of Competency Education](#) (PACE) and related policies fundamentally change teacher roles, student activities, curriculum content, school organization, and accountability. It also has powerful equity implications as its inherently assets-based approach supports students in learning at their own speed with the explicit expectation that doing so will help them succeed in meeting high standards. Moving those reforms forward required strong partnerships with teachers and community engagement from the beginning; NH state law bars the Department of Education from mandating changes, so reforms can only be scaled through voluntary district-level adoption.
- Federal approval in 2018 of NH's PACE pilot under the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority Program authorized by ESSA, allowed for marked expansion of the program (over 200% in the first year) and enhanced the state's position as a national exemplar.
- NH's 2016 state election results were aligned with federal shifts and ushered in state leaders seeking to privatize education. This underscored the importance of both deep community engagement and the centrality of adequate and equitable school funding in preserving and advancing those reforms.
- [ORGANIZATION NAME] drove the engagement vital to the growth of the PACE program and built a powerful statewide network to squelch ongoing privatization efforts, propel the state to re-examine the way it resources its public schools, and launch a ground-breaking movement to build a community-driven strategic plan for the state's largest and most diverse school district, Manchester.

### Partner Reflections on the Role of the National Partnership

- NH Key Place Partner reflections on the role of the national partnership in their work emphasize strategic supports and national connections that have evolved in sync with the state's challenging policy environment, the co-construction of high-impact communications artifacts, and the

regranting of national foundation funds to a spartan philanthropic environment. As one Key Places partner described it, the Partnership “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.”

### Increased Capacity

[REDACTED]

### Impact on Policy & Practice

[REDACTED]

## Looking Back: Taking Stock of the Key Places Strategy To-date

### Evolution of the Roles & Capacities of Current Key Places

Key Places have grown from atomized, and in some instances nascent, state-based efforts to coalitions and organizations that now see themselves as part of a broad collaborative network to advance an affirmative vision of racially just, equitable school systems. Key Places partners are woven across all the governing bodies and strategy strands of the Partnership network and are among its most engaged members. All have played significant roles in the setting of the network’s three priorities of advancing a community schools strategy, equitable and adequate education resourcing, and a strengthened and diversified teaching profession.

#### ***Key Places’ relationships to/within national Partnership each evolved differently.***

Key Places’ relationships to and within the Partnership network and national team each evolved differently. This can be attributed to a range of factors, including: the extent to which the local coalitions were ‘nascent’ at the outset of the strategy; the overall local/state resources available to each coalition; and, the degree to which their local/state policy contexts changed during implementation.

- **In Georgia**, partners draw upon the national Partnership team in the shaping of their communications strategies and content, and have come to view the national team almost as an extension of their own capacities. Partners also described the Partnership’s lead coordinator of the Key Places work as a vital ‘on call’ thought-partner and strategist.

- **In New Hampshire**, the relationship has deepened, particularly from a communications perspective. At the outset, the flow of Shared Story artifacts was largely “top-down,” as one Key Places Partner described it. Today, ideas, content, and strategies are now built collaboratively and move in both directions.
- **In California**, the relationship has moved from what a KP partner described as akin to “national staffing local” as they built the [PARTNER ORGANIZATION], to one where today, it feels more “a bit remote” or “occasional,” as one partner described it. To build the [PARTNER ORGANIZATION], CA partners drew inspiration from the national Partnership’s Shared Story, Shared Policy, and other structures and ways of working.

*“We’ve really leaned on the Partnership’s expertise, their resources, all of those things in guiding our own strategy, and figuring out how to work best with the Partnership. It’s grown into a really robust and incredibly valuable relationship for [organization] and for the state in general, in terms of setting narratives.”*

— Key Places Partner

*“I think what’s important is that you could look at [state] on the one hand and say, Well, this work has been going on for almost two decades. And, what role did the Partnership play? The relationships were there. But...there’s lots of different ways in which the work wouldn’t be in the place it is without the Partnership. It created a space for something new to be built out of something that had been in existence for a long time. And the other thing that’s changed...we really all were captivated by the idea of this long-term vision. And that’s still held.”*

— Key Places Partner

***Funder involvement continually shifted, but complexities of funder-field power dynamics remain.***

Key Place, national, and funder partners all describe the strategy as one that was driven by funders at the outset. One national partner described the strategy as a “philanthropic one”: each place is partially funded through the Partnership and as a result, places and the national Partnership have deep influence on each other. Funder involvement, both strategically and financially, has shifted dramatically in the four years since the strategy launched - both favorably and unfavorably, depending on the point in time and place.

- The [PARTNER ORGANIZATION] had a powerful state funding base to begin with and has also been very successful in significantly growing its flow of resources.
- Efforts in Georgia to secure strong and reliable local dollars have not yet significantly grown the coalition’s funding base.
- New Hampshire lost its leading funder, [ORGANIZATION NAME], following the foundation’s strategic overhaul, but won long-term investment of the state’s only major statewide foundation.
- Even as the work in California is comparatively well-resourced, all three places continually navigate the challenges of opportunities to organize and move policy that demand significantly more and longer-term resources than are presently flowing.
- Bringing balance into funder-field power dynamics continues to be among the Partnership’s most elusive goals. Across field, national, and funder partners, there is a

strong sense that this is a fundamental and yet still unrealized goal of the Key Places strategy and the Partnership more broadly.

***“Radical honesty can help bridge that gap [between the partners and funders], ...that's been one of the best things of the Partnership and one thing that could really help other collaboratives, or help us in this next phase of the Partnership --there's a very unique set of very trusting relationships between partners and funders. I think acknowledging that and then deepening it and finding ways to make it even more transparent and safe for both sides would be great.”***

**— Key Places Partner & Funder**

### ***Changes in local & national policy contexts demanded shifting from offense to defense.***

The 2016 national elections dramatically changed local and national policy contexts. Key Places partners and the broader Partnership network were compelled to reassess policy objectives and shift from offense to defense. Importantly, these changes also elevated equitable and adequate education resourcing as a prerequisite to teaching and learning reforms, which is why education resourcing is now among the network's core priorities.

- In some places, that defensive posture was successfully leveraged to strengthen and expand local coalitions (California, New Hampshire).
- In all places, many plans to advance an affirmative, proactive vision and strategy were recalibrated to focus on protecting fundamental access and rights as well as newly won gains.

### **Roles & Contributions of National Partnership & Key Places Designation**

All Key Places partners found the national Partnership team to be beneficial partners in their work, even as the contours of those relationships and challenges to the work evolved. The roles and contributions most valued by Partners are noted below.

#### ***Catalyst for new collaborations, bigger picture visioning, living into shared values***

- Interviewees across all vantage points, emphasized the unique power of being connected to a national effort with an affirmative, values-aligned vision. This connection to “something bigger” strengthened their commitment to “living into those [shared] values,” as one national partner described it.
- Interviewees also emphasized the significance of what one partner described as the “collective thinking that influences each other” as partners build connections to others across the network doing the same work.

- In California, the Partnership was a catalyst for new and deeper collaboration and provided important capacity in the early stages of building the [PARTNER ORGANIZATION]. It provided space for partners to reimagine their collaborations and re-center previously tactical, campaign-to-campaign approaches around a long-term, bigger picture vision.

***“Community Schools is a great example of an affirmative vision - the Playbook didn't really come out of Key Places, necessarily, but was responsive to Key Places. I think all of the work that ...is happening in [state] around performance assessments and taking something that could be wonky and centering the student in that. All of those things have helped us not just reframe, but rethink what a racially just education looks like. It just started to help all of us build out a more robust vision that it is about funding, but it's not just about funding, that it is about teachers, but it's not just about teachers. We have gotten more sophisticated collectively.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

***“The Partnership allows us to honor a space for us to be our authentic selves...and then be able to work through, how do I take the authentic me and then go back to my [state] to still move? Being a Black female, it's difficult to not be able to sit in a room and talk about the over-identification of Black males in suspension or Black females in disciplinary infractions, for example. But being able to say that in the Partnership group, and have everybody say, we need to do something about it! And then being able to scale that to be able to say, this is the way that you can take this back to your [state] and make some valuable change --it has been a phenomenal opportunity to be a part of the Partnership.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

### **Technical assistance, thought-partnership, artifacts & resources – yet, bandwidth limits uptake**

- Thought-partnership with the national team was among the most mentioned contributions of the national Partnership to the Key Places work. Strategizing and in some cases coaching around funder development, proposals, and work plans were noted. One Key Place partner emphasized, “we have calls constantly” with the Key Places lead coordinator.
- Key Place, national, and funder partners all named the national Partnership’s framing tools, message testing, communications strategy supports, access to frame checks via FrameWorks Institute, and production and distribution of stories as vital assets to the Key Places work. Shared Story was noted not only for the access it provides to content and

resources, but also for its role as a unique and effective professional development community for communications leaders.

- Key Places partners mentioned the high value of the resources and artifacts shared by the Partnership. The *Community Schools Playbook* was the most mentioned highly valued resource. The *Community Schools Playbook* aside, nearly all Key Places partners also emphasized that they lacked the capacity to leverage many of the Partnership's resources and artifacts in their work. One Key Place partner described trying to utilize those resources as akin to "drinking from a firehose."

***"The Partnership's massive capacity to help with framing to help with policy work to help with thought partnership, having that giant behind us to help us with everything that we do has been absolutely critical in shaping the narrative and shaping the dialogue and shaping the conversation in [state]. Without the Partnership, I don't know that [organization] would necessarily have the impact that we've had when it comes to influencing the narrative about student equity."***

**— Key Places Partner**

***"...you have all these resources, all these partners, all this material, but it's also a lot that you have to go in and figure out how to actually activate and leverage."***

**— Key Places Partner**

### **Access to & collaboration with funders**

- Networking and the opportunity to share space with funders were noted by nearly all Key Place partners. Additionally, national and funder partners emphasized that the Key Places' connection to a larger national strategy played a critical role by enabling both local and national funders to see their resourcing of the work as in furtherance of their own strategic priorities.

***"...networking with funders, we've been invited to speak at the Education Funder Strategy Group, or things like that...in terms of our own organization being able to benefit from becoming more recognized by funders nationally. That has been helpful. It has been huge. That led to a couple of grants for our collective and for some of our individual orgs."***

**— Key Places Partner**

## **Key Places designation strengthened local coalition credibility & fundraising.**

The Key Place designation has been important to all three places, as well as national and local/regional funders.

- In California and New Hampshire, the designation strengthened the credibility of the work. In New Hampshire, the designation strengthened partners' positioning with local funders, connecting their work and vision to a bigger national initiative. It also brought local funders into relation with those on a national stage.
- In Georgia, partners emphasized that the way the national Partnership engaged with the coalition - allowing local priorities and needs to guide the relationship, resulted in a strong and trusting relationship. The Key Place designation, however, was not one that GA partners leveraged externally or found to strengthen their fundraising. Partners cited the designation as potentially divisive, not externally valuable as few outside their coalition knew what the Partnership for the Future of Learning is, or not one they felt strong enough as a coalition to fully leverage.
- As noted previously, the Key Place designation has been of value to local, regional, and national funders; it has allowed them to connect their own priorities to resourcing either place-based local/regional work and/or a bigger picture national vision and effort.

***“Local groups do not necessarily trust that national groups will have the same alignment...The flip side of that, the way this has been created, which is more of a partnership between a national person working with the Key Places group, allowing the local organization to dictate and set the agenda and then being there to support and work towards the long-term same goal, has created a tremendous trust relationship among all of our organizations in [state] and with the Partnership and the work they are doing.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

***“It's funny, I think I had forgotten even that we're a Key Place. I definitely feel like in the past year, we really picked up our identity as the [state coalition]. And that identity and even the branding links us to the national, but we've been leveraging that more for the ability to impact stuff in [state] and less for wanting to have a lighthouse effect elsewhere. It's been very much, how do we bring more credibility and build power of this brand for the purpose of being a more persuasive force here in [state]?”***

**— Key Places Partner**

*“Without a Key Places strategy, it was very hard for us to make the case to invest in the Partnership writ large, because our charter is that we should have a positive impact on [state] students. It's hard to make that case on narrative, if the stories are from only other states. It's hard to make that case on systems. So, with the Key Places, you actually don't only get to make the case that it's relevant to a strategy, but you also can say it has a multiplying effect, that we get to learn from other states. It's almost a feedback loop for the state, like, maybe we're successful in some things that others are not...But also, we're learning from the other places.”*

— Key Places Partner & Funder

## **Key Place Contributions to Other States, National Partnership**

Key Place, national, and funder partners noted that Key Places lend the national Partnership credibility and traction in the field. However, there were subtle but significant differences in the ways they conceptualized the contributions of Key Places to work in other states and the national Partnership.

### ***Key Places ground the work of the Partnership, offering focal points, traction, & credibility.***

- Interviewees from all vantage points emphasized that Key Places have afforded the national Partnership credibility, focus, and “actual traction,” by anchoring the Partnership’s vision and values in the policy and organizing work moved by state-based partners.
- National partners noted that Key Places “stand in as the achievements of the Partnership” or as “proof of concept,” as one described it.

*“I think it's [the Key Places strategy] been key in not becoming that typical national alliance. Everywhere I go, I always hear New Hampshire, Georgia, California....and that is the tension when you lead a national network, you lose that state focus. I think more than just identity -- more of the intangible ways. It's always been really clear that this isn't just like a national umbrella, but it's really anchored in these powerful state examples that have been hopefully resourced and given support and capacity, and given autonomy to thrive. The value and theory behind that has been really key. I don't think as a state member-- if that hadn't been there, I don't feel like we would have stuck around for as long. Everybody always wants to look one layer up.”*

— Key Places Partner

### **Key Places partners are among the most engaged members of the network.**

- Key Places partners are distributed across all strands and governing bodies of the Partnership, making them among the most woven members of the network. They are also among its most active members.

### **Views diverge on whether learning is happening across Key Places.**

- Key Places partners were more likely than national partners to identify learning from other states. They specifically emphasized drawing from Georgia's use of 2017 "school turnaround" legislation to move their Community Schools strategy; California's long history of community organizing and centering of communities of color and youth, and; New Hampshire's innovative deeper learning reforms.
- While Key Places partners conceptualized their work as serving as "proof points" or "exemplars" of what is possible for other places, almost without exception, they were not able to point to clear examples of how *other* Key Places partners were leveraging learning from *their* work.
- National partners and team members were more likely than Key Places partners to say Key Places' contributions to other Key Places and states were unclear or "unknowable." Some attributed this to the ambiguities of an emergent strategy, others to the fact that these kinds of transfers are inherently difficult to measure. These topics are explored in greater detail below (see pages 22-3).

*"I'm not sure if there's anything that they got from us, but I definitely got a whole lot from them just by being a Key Place and being able to be a part of that room and highlight what I was doing, and everybody else, giving me feedback on it and then telling me what they were doing to help me inform our practice."*

— Key Places Partner

### **More learning is happening via connections to broader network & its priorities, than via direct connection to the Key Places strategy.**

- Panning out to the broader network, Key Places, national, and funder partners noted that learning from Key Places is happening, but not necessarily as a direct result of the Key Places strategy or designation, or as one interviewee put it, "in a planful way." Instead, they viewed it as an organic outcome of the broader connections fostered by and across the network and within the strategy strands.
- Some of the strongest engagement from Key Places partners followed the network's identification of its three priorities, which created avenues through which Key Places

partners (and partners across the network more broadly), could engage and collaborate on issues and topics of direct relevance to their own work. The education resourcing community of practice is the strongest example of this for Key Places partners, with wide representation from across all three, as well as representation from twelve other states, too.

## **Challenges in the Implementation of the Strategy**

Interviewees from all vantage points noted that from the outset, unanswered questions about the Key Places strategy presented challenges during its implementation. Those challenges adversely impacted Key Places partners and the national support team, as well as the strategy's overall resourcing.

### ***Points of weakness in the strategy's undergirding***

- Key Places, national, and funder partners emphasized that the Key Places strategy itself was not fully articulated or sufficiently de-limited. Some viewed the underlying theory of change as not fully-formed.
- National partners pointed to the disconnect between the initial strategy that was, on paper, focused on district-level reform, yet Key Places partners generally operated at the state-level and were not resourced for district-level engagement.
- Interviewees emphasized a related lack of clear strategic objectives across each level of implementation. This resulted in divergent understandings of the purpose and role of the strategy as it related to the work of the Key Places themselves, as well as to how it related to the structures, priorities, and actions of the broader Partnership network.
- Similarly, interviewees noted the need for clarity about the intended direction(s) of learning from the Key Places work. As one national partner put it, "do national ideas, national narratives, national policies, get vetted and tested and tried out" through Key Places, "or, does what's effective in places get shared?"
- With only a few exceptions, interviewees probed the strength of the "lighthouse" concept (i.e. places that demonstrate that the Partnership's vision and values are achievable and that could be amplified to inspire aligned systems reforms, elsewhere), noting that given the limited scale and resourcing of the strategy, neither the national Partnership nor the Key Places were well-positioned to support widespread learning from and scaling of related systems change efforts elsewhere.
- Partners from all vantage points expressed a need for clarity about who "owned" the strategy (i.e. its development, implementation, and/or outcomes): Key Places, the national Partnership, or funder partners. The delineation noted here is intentional; no interviewees conceptualized it as fully held by all three.

*“...we ended up with Key Places being largely, by virtue of the folks that we supported and we work with...an effort that is about either bolstering, or protecting, or furthering state policies that are related to the vision and values...And this is where original intent comes in. There were unresolved questions upfront on Key Places that never really fully got resolved around -- this is about concrete exemplars that are expressing the vision and values, the affirmative vision. What is the right level at which that should happen?...I don't think state policy is necessarily the right level. It is important...But it's not where you're gonna see that expression. And so, if it's not about exemplars, then what is it about?”*

— National Team Member

*“I think that more communication around, What is the priority of the Partnership for the Future of Learning? What does it mean to be a Key Place? What supports and services are available to Key Places, and not only to us as [organization], but even to a broader audience, to make sure that everybody across the board is understanding what we have in being a Key Place.”*

— Key Places Partner

### **Resulting points of weakness in operationalization**

- Ambiguities in the ‘undergirding’ of the strategy translated to challenges understanding its impact; aligned measurements of outcomes were not fully-defined and ‘baked in’ from the outset.
- Key Places, national, and funder partners noted that the structures to support the multi-directional transmission of learning from, between, and across Key Places and the national Partnership network were not resourced to the levels needed to advance the strategy.
- National and funder partners emphasized that the feedback loops and ‘muscles’ needed to continually learn and recalibrate during implementation needed to be prioritized from the outset and resourced accordingly.

*“...how do we know if the Key Places stuff is working? If you want to do continuous improvement, then you've got to have a better kind of evaluation improvement method. And it comes back for me -- what's the purpose of the thing? Are you evaluating for what's useful for other places? Or, are you evaluating the change made in those places?”*

— Funder Partner

*“One of the biggest pieces of feedback that I want to offer about the Partnership's work at this moment, is that I think that clarity falls dramatically after the Partnership does any articulating of what it is about, how it is going about doing that at the highest level. So when you talk about being a network, when you talk about advancing an affirmative vision, when you can even anchor on the framework --that all makes huge sense. And then you start to drill down and so what does that, and the weaving and connecting that a network does, look and sound like? Even one layer down, it starts to get murkier, and you get two layers down and it's clear as mud. And I say that as someone who's been trying to make it clear. So it's not like 'they' are doing this. It's like 'we' have constructed this thing!”*

— Funder Partner

### ***Funder-field power dynamics hindered critical conversations & clarity of intent.***

- Throughout the building and implementation of the strategy, power dynamics between funders and all other partners and national Partnership team members deterred open, candid discussion. This left important assumptions, particularly (but not exclusively) involving resources, unintended.
- National partners and team members noted the discomfort and challenge of moving a strategy without clarity about the extent to which the funders who contributed to building it would resource it. They also expressed discomfort in naming that they were not staffed to raise the level of resources the strategy required.

*“...it was very funder-driven, as much as we all said, That's not what we want it to be. That is what it was. You can invite people to the table, but if you own the table, you're still in control, even if you have all these other people around the table. And I think that's still there, to some degree. I think we made enormous strides but ...as long as the control of resources, especially when it's very small flow of resources as in this case, it is very hard to get to a place where there is completely candid feedback, or unguarded, or undefended feedback, because someone else has control of the resources ultimately and there's some level of expectation of impact.”*

— Key Places Partner & Funder

*“...the other place that there was a huge appetite for, that has not really materialized is... the opportunity to be in a different kind of relationship with funders. To co-create this vision for [state] and be more partners than we were funder and grantee. Less transactional and a more*

*transformational kind of relationship. We had the benefit of really tight relationships with funders... But I think the demands of funding and honestly, the muscle we're all familiar with is, I'm grantee, your funder, right? And so, some people literally couldn't get themselves into a different role...We tried to have these sessions where we would think together about what could be next. And they always reverted to reporting out what we've been doing."*

— Key Places Partner

### ***Insufficient funding impacted national & local capacities.***

- Key Places, national, and funder partners emphasized that the resources to move the strategy were insufficient. Interviewees observed the impacts of this in two directions:
  - Insufficient capacity at the national level compromised the Partnership's ability to make and maximize connections between and across places and the network, build and maintain the structural 'muscles' needed to transmit learning and amplify stories, and move with the agility needed to respond emerging opportunities; and,
  - Insufficient capacity at the Key Places level hindered partners' ability to absorb and leverage resources and artifacts from the Partnership, identify and lift up learning and work of relevance to other places, and at the most fundamental level, generally feel well-positioned to meet the long-term challenges of the work.
- National and funder partners noted that the overall ambiguities and tensions of the strategy itself also contributed to the challenges of resourcing it.

*"If you have limited resources, you can either do the work, or you can think about the work, and write about the work. And I think that decision clearly was made to just do the work, which makes sense, with limited resources. But it's a little bit of a missed opportunity for the feedback loop, the whole reason behind having multiple places is that cross pollination."*

— Key Places Partner & Funder

### ***Time: Long-term work in evolving policy & funding landscapes***

- Every Key Place Partner emphasized the challenges of time itself. Political landscapes continually shift, sometimes dramatically, and require constant recalibration of strategies and capacities as well as a reliable, sustained, and strong flow of resources. At the same time, funders continually shift priorities as thinking about, and trends in, education reform change. Advancing an affirmative vision for racially just, equitable public education systems is an immensely long-term endeavor. Interviewees emphasized that the resilience of that

work and the people who carry it forward, depends on a deep trust between field, national, and funder partners who all share in the long-term commitment to move, support, and adequately resource it.

***“One of the biggest challenges is not being able to foresee what's ahead. So, we were on a path in recognizing the goals of Key Places, and putting together all of these policy teams, and building a table, and then all of a sudden, we had an education Commissioner who really served as a blockade.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

### ***Initial assumptions offer important learning going forward.***

- Interviewees from all vantage points noted that they made significant assumptions about the amount (vast) and duration (long-term) of funding that would flow in support of the work.
- National partners noted that there was a strong (incorrect) assumption that if national and/or local funders invested heavily in the work, other funders would, too.
- Key Place, national, and funder partners noted that the strategy made certain assumptions about what constituencies would be closely-partnered in the Key Places work: systems leaders, state agencies, and teachers (unionized and not). Depending on the place, that did not always come to pass.
- Key Place and national partners noted that the strategy assumed that elevating the work of the Key Place ‘lighthouses’ would be powerful enough to catalyze similar work in other places. However, as one Key Place partner put it, that did not happen in “the absolute sense.”

***“Superintendent associations and superintendents are barely a part of the Partnership today. And I think it is challenging to overcenter them, but...they have to be involved in a way more robust and significant way....Another area is essentially our attention to teachers, both teachers who are unionized and organized and teachers who are not.”***

**— National Partner**

***“When I was rereading the memo, and it was talking about the original aims being to provide lighthouses or proof points... was that a solution looking for a problem? Because when I think of***

*the Key Places strategy, the parts of it that I can see less clearly are the instances where whatever the proof point was, not just that it was elevated, but actually that it spread...I don't see evidence that it was cast like seeds throughout the network...In addition to not being funded to do that, I wonder if that was the right move or just an assumption that that would be a good thing to do...I'm not sure about that as a strategy."*

**- National Partner**

## Going Forward: Advancing a Remodeled Place-Based Approach

Interviews yielded a strong set of findings to guide place-based work going forward.

### Place-based Strategy Objectives & Mechanisms for Achieving Them

Key Places, national, and funder interviewees, without exception, emphasized the importance of continuing to ground the national network in a place-based strategy. National, funder, and to a lesser extent, Key Places partners, also emphasized the importance of moving from an emergent strategy to a deliberate and focused one. This is consistent with the findings of the Partnership's evaluation, *Progress and Lessons from the First Five Years: Evaluation Findings Final Report (Evaluation, see page 5)*.

There was also broad agreement that the strategy must be 'opened up' to a greater number of places. The desire to maximize learning across the network from a wider range of places was unanimously expressed by partners. **Interviewees imagined this wider strategy as part of a larger remodeling of the national network, reassessing distinctions between the Shared Systems and Key Places work - and, possibly Shared Policy and Shared Story, too.** Coupled with a low, medium, and high touch approach to supporting the transmission of learning and practices across the network, the strategy would also be aligned with the capacity of the national team and resources. What follows are partner recommendations for mutually compatible objectives going forward, as well as some of the mechanisms needed to achieve them.

#### *Maximize Influence via Light, Medium, High Touch Approach to Strategy*

Key Places, national, and funder partners expressed a strong desire to see the national network positioned to respond to opportunities and 'unique moments in time' with greater agility. They also recognized the finite capacity of the national team and recommended that the network be more intentional about using all the levers available to it to maximize its influence.

- National and funder partners emphasized the significance of the Partnership network tending to immediate COVID-19-era needs with the understanding that the pandemic has had profound long-term implications for our public education systems. They consistently urged getting, as one national partner put it, "focused and intentional" about *what* the national network aims to influence and *how*.
- Partners generally recommended shifting the network's overall place-based approach to a significantly more flexible one. Going forward, the national team could provide supports and make connections through a "low, medium, and high touch approach," as one national partner described it. Importantly, this approach was also viewed as a partial remedy to the capacity and resource constraints of the national team.

### **Engage more values- & practices-aligned partners.**

- Almost all interviewees saw value in expanding the network's place-based approach to more places. The most oft-mentioned rationale was that to maximize learning, more places need to be involved in the strategy so that each place can see itself in some *other* place. Interviewees noted that because context varies so widely across places, it is essential to have a wider range of place-based policy and organizing work and relationships from which to draw.
- Unsurprisingly, given what partners identified as the strengths of the original Key Places strategy, they also emphasized that further grounding the national network in places going forward is essential to its credibility, traction, deep relationship-building, and transmission of learning and practices.
- The vast majority of interviewees, and particularly those with national vantage points, recommended growing relationships with a larger number of places. They recognized that this would necessitate a shift to a "lighter touch" approach, with national staff/consultants providing connections and building relationships, but not providing ongoing, on-call strategic and organizational support. Some place-based partners noted the value of continuing a deeper level of support, but no funders saw that as feasible and fundable.
- National partners emphasized the need to ensure strategic alignment between a remodeled place-based strategy and the systems-level at which place-based partners engage.

***"So I do think a place-based approach is important to be core to the work of the Partnership. Rethinking how that's accomplished so that more people in places see themselves in the work and benefit from it, will help the Partnership in terms of its national presence. "***

**— National Partner**

***"Yes, we can have these academic conversations about Shared Systems or Shared Story, but the rubber meets the road locally in actual places... for the national Partnership to remain vital, it needs to have tentacles that reach down into states and down into specific districts and into specific communities to see if any of this stuff works, and how it works, and to bring those proof points back up to the national conversation."***

**— Key Places Partner**

***“There could be one more Key Place this year, or it could be 10. But if they're 10, it's not gonna be because the Partnership names them, staffs them, and manages all these things. It's going to be because local people say, we have been working on this, we're interested in this, we think the Partnership has value, we want to take advantage of these pieces...you could help us in these ways. But it's their project with support, not the Partnership's project. We just can't do one new one every five years, or it's just a slow road.”***

**— Funder Partner**

***“..part of the puzzle is to make it all come together in a way where we're maximizing our thinking power and our influence, and that's showing up in a lot of places around the country, not Key Places, but a lot of places, as many places as possible.”***

**— National Partner**

### ***Integrate Key Places and Shared Systems.***

- National, funder, and to a lesser extent, Key Places partners, emphasized the need to reassess the separation between the Shared Systems and Key Places strategies. Interviewees saw a critical relationship between the two, emphasizing that linking them would ensure the actual work of place-based partners grounds the theoretical work of Shared Systems.
- There was an additional dominant theme: places should be driving the substance of the learning across the network and all of its strategy strands and structures should be intentionally built in support of that.

***“...there is a really strong intersection and it feels like it could be really valuable for Key Places to be leaning in on system change.”***

**— Place-based Partner**

***“We should be able to identify a critical mass of places that are where we can begin to elicit the components of how the vision and values actually come to life in those places. So in many ways, it's very much like the Shared Systems agenda, maybe one in the same.”***

**— National Team Member**

***“I’m not sure we’re taking as much of an advantage as we could be of the cumulative power of the connections within the Partnership... I would love to see us figure out how to turn the corner a little bit more on that. Maybe the combination of Key Place and Shared Systems-- if you’re going to do anything systemically, you’ve got to be engaging everybody in the system. And if you don’t engage everybody in the system, then you make a lot of mistakes.”***

**— National Partner**

### **Consider broader remodeling of the network.**

A significant number of interviewees, particularly those with national vantage points, urged reconsideration of the current delineation between the network’s strategy strands. Their recommendations should be factored into the Partnership’s broader regeneration planning.

- Reflections on the configuration of the strategy strands and network generally had Shared Systems’ Design Principles, coupled with the Partnership’s *A Policy Framework for Tomorrow’s Learning*, serving as the overall ‘umbrella’ under which aligned issue/priority-driven strategy strands engage the network.
- From there, Partners shared a range of related network remodeling opportunities, from some continued delineation of the Policy and Story strands, to channeling the energies and expertise of members in the current strands entirely into communities of practice. Those communities of practice would focus on network priorities and specific issue areas. The latter option would represent the end of strands that “silo” policy, place-based, systems, and story work, as numerous partners put it, and instead integrate each of those elements into dedicated priority or topic areas.

***“Where do we see the Partnership getting traction? The answer to that is usually the network priorities. People show up because they are fighting for community schools, or they know that their funding formula in their state really needs a lot of work and they don’t know how to go about that process. That’s where we see energy. It also has this other great benefit of focusing the Partnership’s energy too, because the Partnership can’t be doing all of this at once. If there were only three groups to manage, it would be much more straightforward.”***

**— National Partner**

## *Prioritize Capacity Building, Deep Networking & Learning*

Nearly every interviewee emphasized the power and centrality of the relationship-building and transmission of learning that happens across the network, and saw the strengthening of those two areas as core objectives going forward.

- How interviewees conceived of the purpose and structure of learning across the network can be grouped in two ways:
  - Capacity / skill-building - Partners from all three vantage points emphasized the importance of the national network enabling its partners to ‘come away stronger’ from all of its engagements / touchpoints (e.g. assemblies, community of practice convenings, grant opportunities). Importantly, the emphasis was consistently on skill and capacity-building rather than knowledge-building. Examples included building fundraising skills, securing resources for external evaluation of coalition infrastructure, learning about “ways of working’ or how partners can “organize their work in their own state,” as one place-based partner put it; and,
  - Workshopping problems of practice - Partners expressed strong interest in dedicated spaces to workshop “the thorny cross-cutting issues,” going deep on particular topics with others doing similar work. They viewed place-based work as natural “laboratories” from which to draw innovative ideas and practices, as one funder partner put it.
- Key Places, national, and funder partners emphasized that deep networking and relationship building are central to the uniqueness and power of the national network - and should continue to be central going forward.
- A range of partners emphasized the importance of building an even “deeper networking model” to create a “deeper transformative space,” as one Key Places partner described it. Interviewees suggested creating smaller cohorts or leaning more on issue / priority-specific convenings as potential avenues for accomplishing this. “Trusting”, “safe,” “values-aligned” were some of the words used to describe these relationship-building spaces.

***“...there's an underlying principle that, no matter what people's experience with our [state coalition], if it's short-term or long-term, we want to leave groups in a stronger position than when they join. Ultimately, our goal is capacity-building in a long term way. And even if this [state coalition] goes away, there will be real tangible skills and benefits that the organization's gained. For some, that would be actual grants. But, it's also stronger communications or relationships with policymakers or relationships with funders. We're trying to share that benefit. I think that can also make sense from the perspective of the national too-- that as you're choosing Key Places, or you're going locally, that you're going with a sense of wanting to leave that system stronger.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

***“A lot of Key Place work is knowledge building around what's going on, where it should probably be more skill building like, this is how you do this. This is how you move this. If you want to do this in your state, these are the steps you need to take. And I feel like that's absent. And so there needs to be more skill building and the Key Places are the case studies.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

***“I would be interested in a deeper networking model. There's this beautiful vision and values, which is really powerful. We don't have something right now that is connecting different parts of the ecosystem together. But, I don't want to be a part of something that's so massive that there aren't deeper connections.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

## **Place-based Partner Criteria**

Taken collectively, the range of criteria recommended by Key Places, national, and funder partners were notably similar to those put forward in both the 2016 launch-phase memo, *Key Places Strategy: Consensus and Questions* (see page 4) and the 2020 report for the Partnership by Digital Promise, *Locating and Linking Places: A Report for the Partnership for the Future of Learning* (see page 3).

### ***Places should be values & practices aligned & looking to collaborate.***

There was clear agreement across Key Places, national, and funder partners about two criteria for place-based partners going forward:

- Place-based partners should continue to be aligned with the national network's values and practices and centering of racial justice and equity; and,
- While the original strategy was not driven by local demand and what places deemed to be “in their self-interest for getting involved,” as one national partner put it, interviewees from all vantage points emphasized that it should be going forward. Interviewees noted that this would spur greater learning, deeper engagement, and more traction overall.

Importantly, interviews revealed a tension between opening the strategy up “wide” with minimal or no further criteria, versus some continuation of a “gatekeeping function,” as one national partner viewed it, by maintaining additional criteria. Roughly equal numbers of interviewees held these contrasting views. Partners with the latter viewpoint tended to put forward similar additional criteria (to be considered collectively, not as a ‘menu’ of options):

- Place-based partners should be diverse coalitions that have clear track records of doing work collaboratively and effectively. Overall, they should be community-led.
- Place-based partners should already have sufficient capacity and resources to move their strategies forward and not need resources from the national network to support their core programmatic efforts.
- Generally, place-based efforts should not be nascent. A few Key Places and national partners noted an important potential exception to this, however. If there are places where unique “sparks” are happening with “emerging collaborations,” as one Key Places partner put it, and/or where the community or state itself is at a pivotal change moment, then some of the aforementioned criteria might be ‘overruled.’

***“I think as we think about Key Places and a strategy refresh, I think we would be well served to understand what is in the self interest of the places that want to be involved so that we can meet their self interest, but also take them to a place that either they want or you know, will want to go as they develop their work.”***

**— National Partner**

***“...appetite-- that the people at the organization, we have a sense that they really understand what the Partnership is, that they believe it's worth their time, not just to be getting specific supports, but to be a part of the community.”***

**— National Team Member**

***“...if... you are trying to strategize what creates the conditions for these practices and ideas to get fuller awareness and flavoring... don't become the gatekeeper for the process. ...figure out a way to align people, make calls through the network and get all of the Locating and Linking places that are willing, and all of the states that have energy, and say, money, no money doesn't matter, we're down with that vision or aligned with that we're okay with being named as being part of it, and here's the two things that we'll do every year as low hanging fruit to stay connected to this network. And you can put us into a directory and people can call us. The Partnership is good at strengthening connections, so get that landed, and then strengthen the connections. You could call it Key Places, or you could just call Places strategy.”***

**— National Partner**

***“The things that were in the memo, values alignment, and a diverse local network, read to me more like qualifications than criteria. ... Values alignment and a diverse stakeholder group are thresholds to get you into consideration. And then, the Key Places own capacity and track record of doing the work, would be very important criteria. I don't think the Partnership is at all resourced or staffed to be in the business of starting up Key Places.”***

**— National Partner**

## **Resources & Capacities Needed to Advance the Strategy**

Going forward, how resources and capacities are factored into a remodeled place-based approach should align with the overall objectives of the strategy. Interviewees shared a wide and divergent range of thoughts in response to the prompt, “Is a funding stream a prerequisite for a Key Place?.” Without exception, however, responses from interviewees were clear that some form of dedicated coordination support for the network’s place-based work should continue. Both topics will require significant additional exploration as the network establishes the finer points of a remodeled approach.

### ***When a funding stream should be a ‘prerequisite’ for a place-based engagement.***

Partner viewpoints on the role of a funding stream in support of place-based work going forward can be grouped into four alternative options, each of which captured the same number of partners:

- Resources should support place-based partner engagement with the national network. Engaging and coordinating with the national team and network partners requires time, capacity, and resources, all of which are generally limited for field partners. A number of Key Places and national partners also noted that funding underscores the importance of place-based perspectives and supports field partners in actively prioritizing engagement in the national network over some of the other demands on their time.
- Resources should be available to place-based partners if “conditions on the ground” require it, as one funder partner put it. Partners emphasized that unique circumstances (e.g. scarcity of local funding, leveraging a pivotal moment) should be factored into funding considerations.
- Resources should be available to place-based partners via planning, capacity-building, and/or other limited scope grant opportunities that help coalitions reach the next level of collaboration, growth, or planning.
- Resources in support of core operations, programs, and ongoing work should not be necessary. Partners with this view emphasized that the role of the Partnership should not

be funding or seeding new or core programmatic work, but instead should be on making existing work stronger. Views on how that work could be strengthened ranged from just focusing resources and capacity on the transmission and amplification of learning, to some of the lighter touch resourcing opportunities noted above, such as planning and capacity-building grants.

***“I think it would be important for the Partnership to provide some funding -- so that there's more of an incentive to stick with the goals of an agreement.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

***“One thing I am acutely aware of, is that most folks that are working hyper locally don't have a lot of bandwidth to just add one more network to their list of affiliations and things to do. What's in it for me, kind of thing. It doesn't have to be money, but money is how you hire people, that's how you build your capacity. Shared Story, all these other ways we build capacity are real, and I don't want to minimize those. But at some level, you just need money to pay staff.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

***“Money changes relationships. When groups are getting regrants from the Partnership, I worry that it becomes harder for them to be 100% candid about what's not going well. Some partners shared organizational challenges and strategy conundrums, and sometimes critiques of network activities. Others I wondered about. Would they tell me? Without that candor, how can we be truly learning together? How can we fail forward if we can't talk about failing? When we shifted to more coordinated funding, I sensed the difference.”***

**— National Team Member**

***“...does the Partnership need to fund it directly? Yeah. At least if it's even just a planning grant or a one time capacity-building grant. But otherwise, how would you really say you're providing a benefit to the state coalitions? I wouldn't go down that road, especially because the Partnership is unique in that it started off as a funders group. That just sounds cheap. If you didn't put \$20K on the table for a planning grant, that just sounds terrible.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

## **Dedicated coordination support**

Across all three vantage points and without exception, partners felt resources in support of coordination by the national team are necessary. Partners offered a range of perspectives on why that support remains important going forward, including:

- It helps build and strengthen engagement and connections with/between place-based partners and the national network;
- It fosters deep and trusting relationships between place-based partners, the national team, and the network more broadly;
- It supports the identification, transmission, and amplification of learning across the network; and,
- It facilitates a sense of responsibility for the implementation of the strategy itself, ensuring forward momentum, continuous learning, and recalibration.

Views diverged on the required level(s) of dedicated coordination support from the national team:

- National and funder partners emphasized the importance of moving from the current and almost exclusively high touch model of place-based partner support (e.g. deep, 1:1 strategic supports, thought-partnership, being 'on call'), to a lower touch model focused more on the overall facilitation of connections and the transmission of learning.
- Key Places partners, on the other hand, generally emphasized a continuation of the current high-touch approach (or, a mix of medium and high touch), focusing on tailored strategic supports and capacity-building for place-based partners.

***“I see the value of it in theory. But what would be most useful to me would be, if there was someone from the national Partnership who knew what we were working on and was able to continually be like, Hey, you're working on a restorative return to school, Oregon has this thing that they're doing, Texas has this thing that they're doing. Your 10 equity points platform looks a lot like this platform from [state], and you might want to look at how they workshopped it. I feel like the pandemic created this thing where a lot of us were all innovating but around very similar problems.”***

**— Key Places Partner**

***“People's salaries are the most expensive thing... And it becomes exponentially more expensive to learn. The learning goal of the Partnership is actually an expensive one. And I feel like we don't***

***acknowledge that as funders. We want action on the ground, like, how many meetings, how many convenings, how many stories, right? We don't really reward, how much learning? Because we don't know how to measure that."***

**— Key Places Partner & Funder**

***"...it is much more valuable to have one person that you call whose role in the organization is to coordinate all the local work and have that person then hook you up with Jenni, or Kathryn...the number of times that national organizations [Partnership partners] have come and testified here, just because we asked, is huge and is entirely facilitated by someone working in that role who you know you can call about anything, anytime."***

**— Key Places Partner**

***"I think yes. I would say that the Partnership needs dedicated support to move forward in the next iteration. I don't think that it necessarily needs Key Places support. I view some of this as-- and this is not precise language-- it's the infrastructure backbone support to the network... that is for sure lacking. And because it is lacking, it constrains decision-making. And I think it perverts some decision-making about what the future course can or should be."***

**— Funder Partner**

## **Summary: Prevailing Recommended Shifts**

Looking across all the reflections and input offered by Key Places, national, and funder partners about the national network's place-based strategy going forward, here is a summary of the shifts most frequently recommended by interviewees:

- The network's place-based strategy should move from an emergent approach, to a deliberate and focused one;
- A low, medium, high touch approach should be leveraged to maximize influence and tend to limitations of capacities at both the local and national levels.

- Engagement with places should be driven by local appetite, values and practices-alignment, and the strategic objectives of the strategy itself, *not* funder strategies or interest areas;
- The strategy should no longer be termed as, or limited to, “Key” Places; places must be integral to the network strategy overall, driving learning, priorities, and actions across the network and as such, no longer viewed as part of a separate strand of the work (see page 42 for related inputs on the importance of the continued use of the “Key Place” designation by those partners);
- The strategy should be merged with Shared Systems, and potentially with other strategy strands, too; and,
- The strategy should no longer seed new work or fund the core operations of existing work.

***“I think that there's some choice points there. And I think that some of those choices also really deliberately need to be made, not just aspirationally, but in the context of the realities of supports that are available for the Partnership to continue to do its work. And so I'm talking about funding in particular, I'm talking about staffing, meaning how many and who with what type of expertise... The Partnership is trying to be too many things to too many people.”***

**— Funder Partner**

## Inputs for the Partnership's Regeneration Planning

The initial intent of the Key Places strategy refresh was to facilitate a collaborative process to answer a set of guiding questions about the Key Places strategy to-date and determine objectives for a potentially recalibrated strategy going forward. The findings from this work underscore the importance of a strategy grounded in place. However, a resounding theme also emerged from the interviews: to maximize the influence of the Partnership's work going forward, the strategy refresh needs to be a part of the Partnership's broader regeneration planning. With that in mind, what follows are a series of recommendations in support of leveraging the findings from this in regeneration planning.

### Clarify the Network's Purpose, Influence, Definition of Action - in This Moment

- With a new presidential administration, far-reaching COVID-era impacts on public education, heightened public consciousness of the role of schools in our families and communities, and strengthened national dialogue about racial justice and equity, there is a new national landscape of opportunities and challenges around which to orient. The network should begin to collectively map this new landscape.
- The findings from this work strongly underscore the importance of a tension also named in the Partnership *Evaluation*: the network needs shared clarity of purpose. What is its defining purpose? That purpose should be explicitly stated and at the center of the construction and implementation of all strategies and structures. The *Partnership Identity 1.0* could be utilized as a resource in support of related discussions.
- Partners continually emphasized that the national network needs to be focused and intentional across all levels of its strategy, structures, and ways of working. To make the best choices about points of focus and aligned intent, the network needs to first understand over what it has the greatest influence. There should be clear strategic alignment between the network's strongest levers for making change and its strategies for doing so.
- There are tensions to bring into harmony around the real and (potentially) aspirational strengths and orientations of the network. These include deep relationship-building, convening, transmission of knowledge, and taking collective action. The *Evaluation* notes that there is evidence that network partners "contribute aligned actions within strands" and yet, "partners are split nearly in half around the value of the Partnership as a way to take collective action" (*Evaluation*, page 5). Partners interviewed for the strategy refresh were firmly oriented around the former three network features as both strengths and elements to center and enhance going forward. Across all the interviews, there was only one mention of "collective action": a partner noted that the network has "an orientation to collective action to learning and reflection." Going forward, it will be essential to define what the

network means by “action.” Undoubtedly, partners have different perspectives on how action should be defined in relation to the network, from the overall purpose of actions (e.g. learning, amplification, relationship-building, policy advocacy, etc.) to the grain size of the actions themselves. A shared definition of action should inform both the strategies the network advances and how the network assesses its impact over time.

- Clearly define the directional orientation of learning and priority-setting across/by the network. Partners resoundingly expressed a desire for place-based work to drive the network’s learning and priorities. Network structures, resources, and ways of working will need to be explicitly articulated, oriented, and aligned in support of this. Because this orientation requires ongoing disruption of established (and resilient) power dynamics, it will also be critical to then provide the network with intentional and safe spaces to evaluate and recalibrate how it is going.

## Revisit “Launch Phase Strategies,” Align Strategy with Resources & Capacities

- The strategies that shape today’s Key Places, Shared Policy, and Shared Story strands were “Launch Phase Strategies.” Five years into implementation with a network of nearly 700 members from nearly 300 organizations and 20 foundations, the Partnership has launched. Regeneration planning should not only explore the merging of a Systems and a remodeled place-based approach, but also fundamental remodelling of the strategy strands and network structures overall.
- In particular, it will be important to explore a potential shift from distinct strategy strands (Places, Systems, Policy, Story) that *by design* create barriers to weaving, to structures organized around priorities and/or issue areas. Place-based, systems, policy, and story work and strategies could, for example, be woven directly into each priority or issue-driven strand. This recommendation is consistent with the *Evaluation’s* finding that the network structures should not be overly complicated and should “closely match” the “network function” (*Evaluation*, page 44). Exploration of some variation of this approach will be particularly important if the network’s place-based strategy no longer channels resources to partners. The engagement of funded Key Places partners aside, the strongest network engagement happens in issue-driven learning space (e.g. the education resourcing community of practice). An approach like this would also reduce the number of network structures the national team manages, reducing significant strains on capacity.

## Factor in Importance of Key Place Designation for the Three Places

- After the network’s place-based strategy is remodeled, it will be important for the original three places to continue to be able to use the “Key Place” designation, if/as it is helpful to their work.
- As the network builds an expanded place-base strategy, it should begin by gauging the appetite of *other current* place-based partners – such as those engaged in the Policy or Systems Work Groups or the education resourcing community of practice – for deeper

engagement on values and practices-aligned work. The *Locating and Linking* report could also then be leveraged to identify new potential values-aligned place-based partners.

## Explore Alignment of Artifacts with Partner Capacities to Use Them

- The *Evaluation* emphasizes that the Partnership network's "ability to produce useful, tangible content for field partners" is an example of progress towards partners' ability to work as a collective," (*Evaluation*, page 4). The findings from this strategy refresh support that assertion, but *also* indicate a need to reconsider the volume, format, and avenues for delivery of that content. Interviewees consistently emphasized that while they valued Partnership resources and artifacts, they often lacked the capacity to use them.

## Continuously Name & Tend to Funder-Field Power Dynamics

- The Partnership's commitment to bringing funders and the field into meaningful relation is unique. Going forward, the Partnership should strengthen its examination and acknowledgement of power dynamics between funders and the broader network. This includes naming and candidly discussing expectations, priorities, and relevant limitations.

## Conclusion

The Partnership network has grown significantly in size and scope over the course of the last five years. Deep relationships across the network have strengthened it, even as its shape has continually evolved. Members have built strong collaborative muscles together and feel uniquely connected to each other and the network's long-term vision of racially just, equitable public education systems. At the same time, the broader national context has changed immeasurably. The findings of this Key Places strategy refresh underscore the continued value of a network strategy grounded in place. They also point to the importance of viewing this refresh as a part of a larger remodeling of the network, leveraging learning from five years of implementation to think strategically about how to fully maximize the power of the network -- in this moment, and well beyond.



## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

1. From your vantage point, how have the roles of the current Key Places grown and evolved over time, in terms of their relationship to and within the national Partnership?
2. What roles have the national support team and the Shared Story and Shared Policy strands played in supporting your work / Key Place partners in achieving local/state changes? Do you think those roles have changed over time?
  - a. Follow-ups for Key Places partners:
    - i. *Have you found the Partnership to be an important and beneficial collaborator/partner in your work?*
    - ii. *What engagement and connections with/through the Partnership have you valued most?*
    - iii. *Has the designation of Key Place impacted your ability to advance your work? And, to what extent does it remain important?*
  - b. Follow-ups for national/field partners:
    - i. *In what ways have the Key Places contributed to advancing an affirmative vision and influencing the dominant narrative and work in other states?*
  - c. Follow-ups for Key Places partners and national/field partners:
    - i. *In what ways do you think Key Place partners have contributed to the shaping and achievements of the national Partnership?*
    - ii. *What have been the most significant challenges to realizing the initial goals of the strategy?*
3. What do you think has distinguished a Key Place from other places where we enthusiastically partner?
  - a. Follow-ups for Key Places and national/field partners involved since the initial conception of strategy:
    - i. *What assumptions did the criteria for Key Places rest upon?*
    - ii. *As the Key Places strategy moved from launching in 2016 to implementation, do you think the capacity of Key Places to meet their distinguishing criteria shifted? What can we learn from that?*
    - iii. *How do you think those shifts should inform our thinking about Key Places in relation to the broader network?*
4. In the context of the Partnership's mission and overarching goals, what should the objectives of the Key Places strategy be, going forward?
  - a. Follow ups for Key Places partners and national/field partners:

- i. *Do those proposed objectives differ from those at the outset of the strategy? How?*
- ii. *How do you see the roles and relationships of Key Places as they relate to the broader network evolving in the coming years?*
- iii. *Given those objectives, do you think we still need dedicated coordination support for Key Places?*

**5. Given those proposed objectives, what should the criteria for Key Places be, going forward?**

a. Follow-ups for Key Places partners and national/field partners:

- i. *What would you see as the relationship between those criteria and the aims of the Shared Systems, Policy, and Shared Story strands?*
- ii. *Is a funding stream a prerequisite for a Key Place? If so, does it need to happen in a particular way (pooled, coordinated, multiyear)?*
- iii. *Finally, based on these proposed objectives and criteria and their relationships to the broader Partnership network, should there be more Key Places?*

## Appendix B: Interviewees

[REDACTED]