

Support for Rural Colorado Schools

How Philanthropy and Districts Came Together to Serve Students in 2020



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Introduction

As schools across the country closed in March 2020 at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it wasn't clear how long in-person education would be disrupted. The abrupt transition to remote learning was particularly challenging for districts in rural communities, many of which have long lacked reliable access to high-speed internet and technological resources for students. The unique circumstances of the pandemic required innovative solutions to address a deepening array of acute challenges faced by rural schools.

In Colorado, the philanthropic community met the moment by supporting rural school systems in fundamentally new ways, upending traditional grantmaking processes to better address communities' needs through two key initiatives: the Planning and Design Support (PDS) initiative and the Education Innovation Fund (EIF; Table 1). RESCHOOL Colorado's Learning Dollar initiative, a program connected to the Education Innovation Fund, also played a pivotal role by distributing money directly to families for education-related expenses.

The deep collaboration among funders that occurred during these initiatives wasn't the only silver lining that emerged in the chaos and uncertainty of 2020. Schools and districts, especially those in rural areas, also set aside considerable time and resources, when both were scarce, to secure needed funding for their students and communities.

In this paper, we describe the origins of these initiatives and their basic design before outlining a set of recommendations for how philanthropy in the state and elsewhere can build on these promising practices to improve future grantmaking.

Table 1 > Colorado Initiative Snapshot

Initiative	Dates	Total Funding	Grant Summary	Types of Grant Recipients
<p>RISE Planning and Design Support (PDS)</p> <p>The goal of PDS was to help applicants develop strong proposals to the Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) grant program by giving them more time to develop their initiatives, build capacity through small planning grants, and work with strategic design partners to strengthen their proposals.</p>	September 2020-December 2021	\$300,000	16 recipients received grants of approximately \$20,000	Just less than a majority of grants went to districts (7), followed by consortia (4), school networks (2), tribes (2), and a postsecondary institution (1)
<p>Education Innovation Fund (EIF)</p> <p>EIF was a fast-paced initiative launched during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. EIF was defined by a low barrier of entry for applicants, openness and transparency on the part of funders, and a focus on collective learning rather than stringent grantee accountability.</p>	March 2020-August 2020	\$319,800	34 recipients received grants ranging from \$2,700 to \$20,000, with an average award of \$9,406	The majority of grants went to nonprofit organizations (18), followed by consortia (11), individual schools (2), a school district (1), an educator (1), and a student (1)

The Planning and Design Support Initiative

Introduction

In September 2020, Colorado Governor Jared Polis used federal funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act to launch the \$40.7 million Response, Innovation, and Student Equity (RISE) grant program. RISE was designed to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and promote innovation in schools, districts, and postsecondary institutions. To encourage proposals from a diversity of schools and districts, the RISE program developed a relatively simple application. Eligible applicants could submit proposals for projects that addressed broadly defined areas of focus, including supporting student-centered learning models, redefining the student experience, strengthening the connection between education and industry, and promoting educational innovation that outlasted the pandemic. The selection committee, comprising parents, educators, students, education leaders, and other community members, included several rural voices, and funding priority was given to rural applicants and schools or districts assigned Priority Improvement or Turnaround plans from the Colorado Department of Education (i.e., the lowest-performing districts and schools in the state).

To further ensure equitable access to RISE funding, a coalition of public and private actors, including the Colorado Governor's Office, the Gates Family Foundation, Gary Community Investments, The Anschutz Foundation, and the Boettcher Foundation, partnered to create the PDS initiative. Lyra Colorado, a nonprofit organization connected to the Gates Family Foundation, also supported PDS by facilitating the grantee selection process, distributing funding to grantees, and providing other logistical support for the initiative.

PDS was a capacity-building, geographically focused initiative designed to ensure rural communities had equitable access to RISE funds. PDS included three phases. First, organizations and individuals from across the state could apply to become “design partners.” Second, schools, districts, and consortia could apply to receive assistance from design partners, such as support in designing projects, facilitating stakeholder engagement, and writing grant proposals. Third, schools, districts, and consortia were matched with design partners to collaborate on proposals to the RISE fund.

In launching PDS, a group of public- and private-sector partners recognized that rural districts often have neither the capacity nor the time to submit proposals to competitive grant programs. “The concept is really valuable and important. It’s an acknowledgment that something like this is needed to support smaller districts when we have these big statewide grant competitions,” said Kate Bartlett, executive director of School District Operations for the Colorado Department of Education and part of the review team for PDS grants. PDS recipients also saw the value of having extra capacity and support to develop competitive proposals. “My school has 200 kids. There are three districts within an hour that, as an entire district, are smaller than my school. There is no way they’d be able to do anything like this without extra support,” said one PDS recipient.

Partners also recognized that whatever support was provided to these districts needed to be robust and tailored to the priorities of rural communities and schools. Past experience among some of the funders suggested that a grant writer alone was not enough support; they foresaw that rural districts and schools would also benefit from thought partners to help them articulate their innovative ideas and engage stakeholders in their communities.

The Design of PDS

The three-phase process embedded in the design of PDS was simple in concept but complex in execution. The Gates Family Foundation coordinated the selection of design partners and PDS grant recipients, and then facilitated a matching process. First, the Gates Family Foundation invited design partners, which could include nonprofit and for-profit organizations as well as independent consultants, to submit a Google Form that described their experience working with schools, districts, postsecondary institutions, and tribal governments, as well as their strengths and areas of expertise.

Second, PDS applicants completed a short proposal that described their concept for a RISE-funded project and the support they needed from design partners. Additionally, a select group of individuals helping plan the initiative also interviewed PDS recipients to get a deeper understanding of their needs.

Third, the Gates Family Foundation convened a committee that matched design partners with PDS recipients based on how well the design partner knew the community context of the grant recipient or the content area their project focused on – or, ideally, both. Importantly, PDS recipients could apply in partnership with a design partner or request certain design partners. No grant recipient was forced to work with a particular design partner if they didn't feel it was a good match. "This was the most challenging part of the process. It felt a little strange to be in the role of suggesting partners, but looking back, it makes so much sense," said Bartlett of the Colorado Department of Education. "Part of the reason districts needed help is because they didn't know where to get it."

Design partners supported grant recipients' diverse needs in several ways. For example, some PDS recipients came to the process with big ideas that design partners helped distill into manageable project scopes. Other grant recipients needed help organizing, supporting, or facilitating stakeholder engagement. Some design partners brought specific content expertise (e.g., in career and technical education or social-emotional learning) and shared lessons learned from their own work. Most PDS recipients needed some type of proposal support, whether it was grant writing, data collection, or help navigating the logistics of the proposal process.

The nature of the collaboration between grant recipients and design partners varied based on each entity's capacity and expertise. For instance, one design partner helped a PDS recipient engage their community, when past efforts to do so hadn't gone smoothly. In another case, the PDS recipient took the lead on stakeholder engagement while the design partner primarily helped compile materials and design the proposal for the RISE grant competition. "We led on grant work and design; they led on community voice and engagement," said one design partner. Each partnership played out a little differently, according to the needs and capacities of those involved.

Some design partners also networked with each other during the initiative to share insights and expertise across projects, something that helped improve individual proposals and the design process overall. The Gates Family Foundation also provided additional layers of support, routinely checking in with PDS recipients to ensure their needs were being met by design partners and providing feedback on many of the RISE proposals.

Ultimately, eight out of 16 PDS recipients received a grant from the RISE competition – resulting in a 50% success rate, higher than the 15% success rate among applicants without PDS support. At least on this measure, the PDS process helped rural applicants access public dollars.

Promising Practices

Together, the design of both the RISE Fund and PDS demonstrate how **simple application processes, targeted support for priority applicants, and diverse selection committees can facilitate a more equitable distribution of public grant funds across geographies.**

Of course, it's impossible to assess whether PDS participants who won RISE funding would have done so without support from design partners; it's also worth noting that several rural schools and districts won RISE funding without participating in PDS.

That said, rural districts deeply valued the targeted, short-term planning and design support they received from their design partners — support that can often lead to a sizable return on investment for funders. The PDS grantees, who received a collective \$300,000 investment from the Gates Family Foundation, Gary Community Investments, The Anschutz Foundation, the Boettcher Foundation, and other philanthropic organizations, went on to secure \$12.7 million in RISE funding. Philanthropic funders in Colorado and others across the country should consider the ways in which private funding can help rural school districts secure public grant dollars. At least two takeaways emerge:

- **PDS showed that, together, rural communities and design partners can translate big ideas and long-term visions into concrete project proposals.** Some design partners helped PDS recipients identify or build projects around recipients' big ideas by supplying an external perspective and the extra capacity needed to hammer out project details. Often, this meant breaking big, ambitious ideas into bite-sized chunks that could fit into the requirements for the RISE grant program. Design partners often shared best practices from their previous work in other rural communities or by providing expertise in certain content areas. Other partners pushed districts to develop solutions and ideas that might accelerate growth and transformation in a post-pandemic world.
- **PDS also led to the development of new relationships among districts, design partners, and funders.** Several funders noted that they became aware of several new organizations and independent consultants in the space when recruiting for design partners. Design partners and districts also formed new partnerships or deepened existing ones through PDS; in fact, many design partners continued to support grant implementation after PDS grantees won RISE grants — a testament to the value each entity found in the initial partnership. Finally, some PDS recipients gained access to a new network of philanthropic organizations that could support their work in the future. This type of relationship-building is a notable byproduct of PDS, since it could lead to greater access to resources and capacity support for rural districts in the future.

Grantee Spotlights

Adams State University Collaborative (San Luis Valley Region, Colorado)

The Adams State University Collaborative's RISE proposal represented the formalization of a partnership among six school districts in the rural San Luis Valley, the San Luis Valley Boys and Girls Club, ActionLab360, and Adams State University. Some of the collaborative's early work was supported by a grant from the Education Innovation Fund during the summer of 2020.

The Adams State University Collaborative was looking for several things in a design partner, including expertise in career technical education (CTE), experience facilitating stakeholder engagement, help defining the roles and responsibilities of various partner organizations, and support in developing project objectives and benchmarks. Empower Schools, a national nonprofit that supports school systems in several states throughout the country, checked several of the collaborative's design support needs, especially as they related to expertise in facilitation and experience working with multidistrict collaboratives.

The rural districts participating in the collaborative didn't immediately see themselves or their work represented on Empower's website, but in conversations they learned that Empower had done past work in rural Colorado and Texas with multidistrict collaboratives. Perhaps most important was that, after learning more about Empower and its work, the rural districts concluded that Empower wasn't coming in to push its own agenda on the collaborative.

Adams State University Collaborative's \$2.6 million RISE project proposal, which was ultimately funded, aims to develop and build an Entrepreneurship and Innovation career cluster with options for students to access coursework through CTE in high schools and concurrent enrollment through Adams State University.

The project includes funding to provide training to educators, enlist project partners to help overcome barriers to access (e.g., transportation, credit policies), and create advising and mentoring systems to support high school students in exploring and pursuing their career and postsecondary aspirations. Empower Schools was a valuable partner during the development of the project proposal and in the initial phases of implementation after Adams State University received its RISE grant. As one member of the Adams State University Collaborative described it, "We had a lot of ideas spin out from those initial meetings we were having, but we needed to drill down to more details, to gel things together. Empower had resources to support the work, which is still critical to implementation and facilitation of the project."

The Charter School Innovation Consortium (CSIC) (statewide initiative)

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the Colorado League of Charter Schools (the League) began holding routine support calls with 30-40 of its 230-member schools. As fall 2020 approached, challenges around engaging and reengaging students became more pressing for schools. Upon hearing about the RISE grant program, a League staff member drafted a concept paper for a project that would bring a cohort of member schools together to address student engagement. Ultimately, 14 schools, including two rural charter schools, joined the project as the CSIC. CSIC received a PDS grant to support the proposal-writing process with the League as its design partner.

The CSIC developed its RISE proposal through a series of working meetings where at least one representative from each school participated. League staff members refined the ideas generated during these meetings, developing grant proposal sections that were sent out to schools for feedback. In addition to writing the proposal and conducting the necessary background research, the League took on all typical grant-related logistics, which made the lift for schools minimal. Interviewees lauded the collaborative nature of a proposal-writing process made easier by the League, which was perceived as a genuine CSIC partner.

Because of the trust the League cultivated, it successfully managed the facilitation, logistics, and the entire grant writing process. “If any one of us had tried to do it, we wouldn’t have had time or the ability,” said Sean Woytek, head of school for Animas High School, located in rural southwest Colorado. The League “took the feedback from each session that we had, talked with us individually in between, and brought everything together. Each session felt like we were going from a wide angle to closer and closer to a specific project. They did a verification check at each step to make sure they were on the right path, and to see if everyone felt what they were doing and proposing was useful.”

With support from the League, the CSIC won \$1.5 million to create the Increase Diverse Learner Engagement and Achievement Project. The project aims to develop and implement a Universal Design for Learning initiative to increase engagement for students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), gifted and talented students, and students eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Cripple Creek-Victor School District RE-1 (Teller County, Colorado)

Cripple Creek-Victor School District RE-1 is a small, rural school district located about one hour east of Colorado Springs. Its goal in pursuing a RISE grant was to develop CTE programming with well-paying career pathways. The district sought a design partner with experience developing CTE pathways aligned to local workforce needs who could facilitate stakeholder engagement, take the lead on writing the proposal, and eventually support project implementation.

Selection committee members recognized that Trendlines, a Colorado-based nonprofit, was working with rural districts to develop postsecondary pathways and work-based learning programs. In preparing its proposal for the RISE competition, Cripple Creek-Victor led an extensive stakeholder engagement process with the community while Trendlines translated the big ideas and feedback into multiple drafts of a successful proposal.

The partnership between Cripple Creek-Victor and Trendlines illustrates how each partner played to its strengths and relationships. “This area is a very rural, small town, and people don’t always love newcomers. The community was a bit hesitant, wanting to hear about it from me, what we were doing. Knowing that dynamic and what our community needs to get behind something, we took more of the lead in the community-facing parts, and Trendlines helped us articulate that in the grant,” said Miriam Mondragon, superintendent of Cripple Creek-Victor School District RE-1. “Trendlines took what they heard from us and the community and worked closely with us, from beginning to end, to write and complete the RISE grant.”

Cripple Creek-Victor successfully secured a \$1.5 million RISE grant to create a skills-to-employment program connecting CTE coursework and work-based learning experiences in high school directly to employment opportunities. The grant supports the development of two new CTE pathways, project-based and competency-based instruction, and a new Adult Education/Career Center. Trendlines continued to partner with Cripple Creek-Victor during the initial phase of implementation, where the main challenge has been staffing shortages in the district overall and for new positions connected to the district’s RISE grant.

Lessons Learned

PDS recipients secured millions of dollars from the RISE grant program to launch and sustain new supports for rural students and communities. While support focused on a short-term goal, like winning a grant, can be invaluable to recipients, **PDS also helped strengthen schools' and districts' skills in ways that will benefit them far into the future.**

In the process of writing an application for the RISE Fund, some districts worked with design partners to distill big ideas into compelling, grant-funded projects and programs. Other districts deepened their capacity to authentically engage stakeholders in their communities. Regardless of the specific focus of their partnerships, PDS recipients and design partners both gained experiences and expertise that they may not have had the time, space, or support to develop otherwise.

PDS recipients valued their partnerships with design partners and indicated they would have benefited from additional support to implement their RISE-funded projects. For example, some PDS recipients struggled to hire staff for grant-funded positions, a problem compounded by general staffing shortages across rural Colorado that were identified as the highest need in a [recent survey](#) of rural charter school leaders and district superintendents. “There’s lots of background work to do and we don’t have a CTE coordinator in our district,” said one district leader in rural Colorado. “We posted that position, but no one has applied. So those types of things are scary.” In the future, **funders should consider providing a continuity of support that starts in the pre-proposal phase and extends through the initial stages of project implementation.** This type of support can help ensure rural districts not only are provided with equitable access to public grant dollars, but also that they have access to support for implementation if they want it.

Partnerships between design partners and PDS recipients were most effective when design partners built trust among community members and were not seen as merely pursuing their own agenda. The potential for an insider-outsider dynamic between design partners (most of which were based in the Denver metropolitan area) and rural PDS recipients was top of mind for funders. One PDS recipient noted the importance of having someone on the design partner’s team who was “in Colorado, from Colorado, who knows the region.” In describing the partnership, the PDS recipient added, “We have a unique region, which has certain challenges and assets. It really helps if someone is familiar with it. It was also important to our group that it not be a consultant coming in and assigning what they thought we should be doing.” Funders pursuing similar efforts in the future should be thoughtful, as PDS was, in selecting design partners that have experience working in rural communities and/or have the thoughtfulness and humility to authentically support the community’s vision rather than impose their own. Funders should also invest additional time and effort to identify and recruit potential design partners from the rural communities.

Funders also saw that they had to address the needs as rural communities defined them, approaching the process as an opportunity to learn about and support rural schools and the communities they serve. Instead of prescribing specific approaches or solutions, PDS empowered rural schools and districts by championing the ideas they brought to the table. PDS' implicit theory of action was that while rural schools might not always have the requisite capacity or resources to craft a winning RISE proposal, they're best positioned to identify and address the challenges students and families in their communities face. Noting the value of this approach, one funder remarked, "It's been really interesting for us to go into this process, not necessarily having explicit impact goals for the community. We've had more of an open mind about how we can approach this so that we can have a learning mindset that may even roll up to our overall portfolios and initiatives and strategy as a team."

The philanthropic community should prioritize building trusting relationships with community organizations that are based in rural areas and/or led by people of color.

These trusting relationships are key to identifying and recruiting partners in funders' work that understand the needs of their communities and have existing foundations of trust on which to build impactful investments and initiatives. Ultimately, broadening networks and building relationships will help funders identify a diversity of partners within rural communities and ensure that financial resources are distributed equitably to all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or geography. Whether a funder or a design partner, organizations supporting schools and districts must value the expertise and experience of their rural partners and look for ways to support them without imposing their own concepts, solutions, or ideas.

PDS emerged as a promising model for using a small-scale grant program to help rural applicants secure large, publicly funded grants; the initiative offers several takeaways and lessons learned that philanthropic organizations should consider when launching similar approaches to helping rural districts and schools access larger grants.

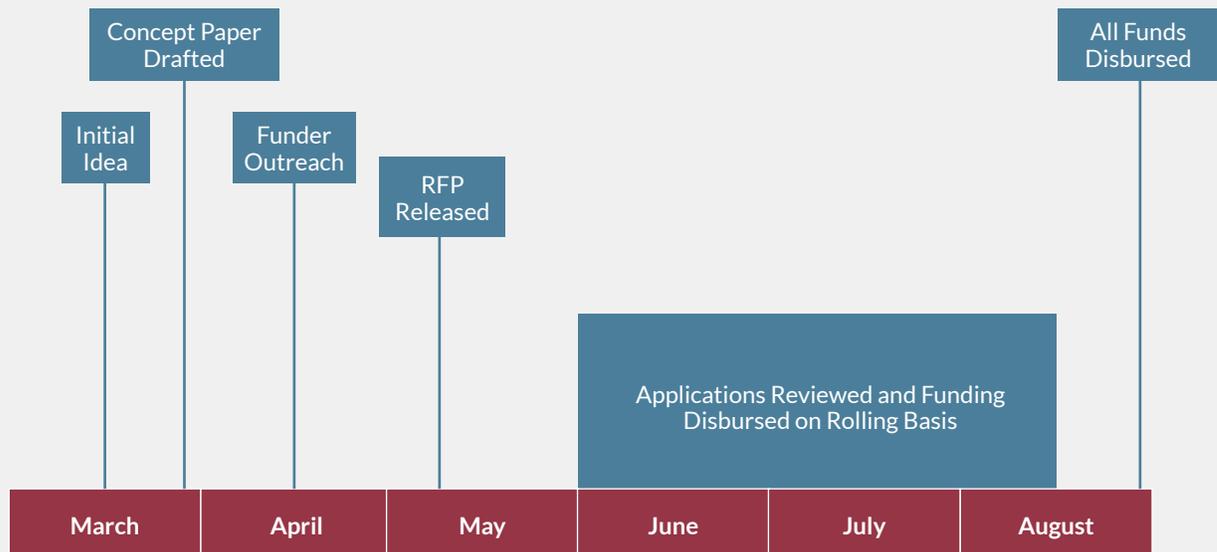
The Education Innovation Fund

In March 2020, a group of Colorado-based philanthropies, led by the Gates Family Foundation and Lyra Colorado, began thinking about ways to respond to the range of new educational challenges and exacerbated needs of students and families in the state. Together with other organizations — including but not limited to Colorado Succeeds, the Donnell-Kay Foundation, and RootED — the Gates Family Foundation and Lyra Colorado created the EIF, a fast-moving grant initiative that provided flexible funding to nonprofits, districts, and schools, as well as individuals such as teachers and parents. At a time when many thought the COVID-19 disruption to learning would be temporary, these philanthropic partners anticipated a profound need and acted quickly. Just three months after initial conversations, EIF disbursed \$319,800 to 34 unique grant recipients (Figure 1).

“We wanted to be nimble, to quickly get the money to those most in need. That meant we had to trust one another and be willing to compromise for the greater good in order to get this funding out the door at the right moment to really help people in a crisis,” said Brett Alessi, co-founder and partner at Empower Schools. Funders participating in the initiative agreed that speed was of the essence. “The dollar amounts probably weren’t as big as some of the bigger grants that folks got eventually,” said Pat Donovan, managing partner at RootED, “but the funders were able to do it sooner or faster for their communities.”

In addition to providing timely financial support to these 34 grant recipients, EIF also distributed \$15,000 to 71 families and 160 youth through RESCHOOL, a Colorado-based nonprofit organization that focuses on providing families with “Learning Dollars” that could be used for a wide range of educational purposes (Sidebar). Moreover, EIF notably led the initial funders and a set of new philanthropic organizations to invest an additional \$745,000 in existing grant recipients as well as projects that were originally unfunded. All told, those initial conversations in March 2020 led to a \$1,088,800 investment in Colorado students from at least seven different philanthropic organizations, including \$320,700 that went to rural-specific applicants.

Figure 1 > Timeline for the Education Innovation Fund, March 2020



EIF was differentiated by a low barrier of entry for applicants, quick grant disbursements, funder transparency, and a focus on collective learning versus grantee accountability. These defining features made it possible for the network of funders to provide many organizations and individuals with timely funding during an extraordinary crisis.

RESCHOOL Colorado's Learning Dollar Initiative

EIF accelerated an initiative administered by RESCHOOL, a Colorado-based nonprofit. Since 2014, RESCHOOL has provided a small number of families and students in the Denver area with access to Learner Advocates and Learning Dollars. Currently, the Learning Advocate Network is only available as a free benefit to parents employed at two Denver metro-area hospitals. Parents who are part of the Learning Advocate Network get support as they navigate their child's learning in and outside of school as well as access to modest Learning Dollars, which provide parents with direct funding to purchase a range of educational resources, services, and experiences.

Prior to EIF, RESCHOOL provided approximately \$10,000 in Learning Dollars to eligible parents in the Learning Advocate Network on an annual basis. EIF presented RESCHOOL with an opportunity to take the concept of Learning Dollars statewide, expand eligibility to the broader public, and increase the funding pool to \$24,000. Experimenting with Learning Dollars as part of EIF helped leaders at RESCHOOL open the program to the public and test the appetite across Colorado.

Eligible parents submitted short descriptions about how they intended to use Learning Dollars (parents were eligible for \$250 for one child, \$75 for each additional child, and a max award of \$550). The demand for Learning Dollars exceeded leaders' expectations at RESCHOOL; more than 400 families submitted applications, and RESCHOOL had to close the application after two weeks. Of those 400 applications, 160 children in 71 families received Learning Dollars. The vast majority (86%) of Learning Dollars went to families with household incomes below \$35,000; 62% of the fund went to families that identified as Latino, Black, African American, Indigenous, American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, Pacific Islander, or multiracial; and 44% went to families who speak English as a second language. RESCHOOL conducted a post-grant survey to determine how funds were used, and 80% of families reported they used Learning Dollars in the ways they intended. The most common uses for Learning Dollars included books (13%), art supplies (13%), education materials (12%), equipment and gear (12%), games and toys (12%), technology (10%), and course/lesson material (9%).

The overwhelming demand for Learning Dollars and the ability to target those funds to the families who needed them the most led RESCHOOL and its key partners to consider how the concept of Learning Dollars could reach every family and student in the state. In the summer of 2021, RESCHOOL opened up Learning Dollars to families again, but this time with a \$400,000 funding pool, higher eligible funding amounts for families (\$500 per student and maximum award of \$1,500), and used two platforms (ClassWallet and DISCOVER) to allow parents to purchase educational resources, services, and experiences. It reached more than 800 students across Colorado.¹

RESCHOOL's efforts to provide families with Learning Dollars inspired Colorado's Learning Enrichment and Academic Progress (LEAP) Program, proposed as a ballot measure in November 2021.² If the ballot measure had passed, LEAP would have generated an estimated \$137 million from marijuana taxes that would cover the costs of out-of-school learning and enrichment activities for children in low-income families. Amy Anderson, executive director at RESCHOOL, hoped that positive outcomes from the demonstration project would help "inspire people to vote for Prop 119 as an opportunity to leverage public funds and expand access to much-needed learning opportunities for lots of kids."

Although Proposition 119 ultimately failed, the evolution of RESCHOOL’s Learning Dollar initiative – from a small-scale \$10,000 program limited to two employers, to a \$24,000 statewide experiment open to the general public, to a \$400,000 demonstration project that led to a proposed \$137 million state-funded program – highlights the untapped demand for providing parents with money that they can use to pay for out-of-system learning experiences for their children. It also shows how philanthropic efforts that start small can expand quickly and inspire the design of publicly funded programs.

The Design of EIF

The Gates Family Foundation used a concept paper in initial conversations with partner funders around the design of the initiative, conversations that eventually led to consensus around several wide-ranging opportunities for the initiative and a set of EIF guiding questions that informed the design and implementation of the fund (Figure 2).

Figure 2

EIF Guiding Questions

How are districts, schools, learning providers, nonprofits, and other organizations adapting to the disruption caused by the pandemic?

How can we empower families and community members to support learning in this new environment?

How can we ensure continuity of learning and support for students who graduated high school in 2020?

How can we support the most vulnerable children during this time?

What can we learn from this new environment that will lead to innovations at the system and structural levels in education?

The scope of the guiding questions was the result of a compromise among funders on eligibility for funding. Fostering innovation was an explicit aim of the initiative, but EIF funders differed on where they felt innovation was possible, feasible, and most needed. Some felt supporting in-system actors (e.g., districts, schools, consortia of districts/schools and community partners) was most critical; others thought supporting out-of-system learning providers and organizations provided the greatest potential for innovation or direct support to families. The result was a compromise among the funders, in which all three applicant types were eligible to receive an EIF grant.

Regardless of who received grants, funders agreed that there should be a low barrier to entry for applicants. The initiative required only a two-page proposal and allowed applicants to submit written proposals, PowerPoint presentations, or videos. Additionally, the request for proposals indicated there was “not an expectation for applicants to have fully formed projects or ideas.” The goal was to provide “a flexible pool of funding” that would encourage applicants to test prototypes, pilots, and other innovations. This approach yielded 326 grant proposals totaling more than \$5 million in requested funds.

To cull through the immense number of proposals, the Gates Family Foundation formed an EIF selection committee consisting of representatives from each participating philanthropic organization, two intermediary organizations (RESCHOOL and Empower Schools), and two student representatives, for a total of 13 individuals. During four separate review cycles, selection team members reviewed all 326 grant proposals and anonymously nominated three proposals for funding. The entire EIF selection committee convened virtually to discuss nominated proposals and add projects from the general pool that were not shortlisted initially during these convenings — resulting in the funding of 34 EIF projects.

Promising Practices

The crisis-induced circumstances under which EIF was conceived, launched, and implemented produced a unique grant program and a set of three promising practices that the philanthropic community in Colorado and beyond can learn from moving forward.

First, the pandemic underscores just how quickly “normal life” can change. Overnight, the ways school and grantmaking were conducted changed in ways no one expected or fully understood. While it may have been easier to pause and wait for the chaos to settle, the architects of EIF adapted their grantmaking practices when the need was perhaps the greatest and uncertainty was at its highest point.

Motivated to get funds into people’s hands as quickly as possible, EIF **reduced barriers for applicants to submit proposals and accelerated the pace of funding disbursement** among grantees. After making grants, EIF also **prioritized the sharing of best practices over holding grantees accountable** for how they used funds, thereby placing a greater level of

trust in applicants to use their funding properly than is typical for many funders. “This was the fastest-moving, least encumbered grantmaking process that I’ve been involved in,” said Donovan of RootED. “I think it opened up the process a lot more to people who maybe have been resistant to apply for grants in the past.”

Second, soliciting grant proposals and disbursing funds at an accelerated pace required funders, intermediary organizations, and selection committee members to commit significant time and human capital to the work. Securing grant dollars typically requires significant time and resources from applicants, but **to ease the burden on potential applicants, the most time-intensive work fell on the shoulders of the coordinating organizations instead.** Allowing applicants to submit short proposals in a variety of formats increased the number of applications and also made the process of reviewing applications more time-consuming. Colorado’s stay-at-home order during the early days of the pandemic helped ensure most of the individuals involved in this process could make this type of time-intensive commitment, but future efforts to replicate this accelerated process would need to carefully manage the obligations of such an approach.

Third, **the collaborative philanthropic model, where multiple organizations partnered to design and fund the initiative, created benefits for both EIF grantees and funders.** On the grantee side, the consortia, organizations, and individuals receiving an EIF grant gained access to new sources of potential funding beyond the initiative. Since EIF ultimately could only support 34 of the 326 applicants, the coordinating organizations shared information from unfunded projects with more than a dozen philanthropic organizations not involved in EIF. At least 23 of the projects that did not receive an EIF grant were picked up and funded by other philanthropic organizations, such as Caring for Colorado, the Colorado Health Foundation, and The Weld Trust.

On the funder side, EIF “helped us to connect more deeply with some communities that maybe we didn’t have a relationship with before and, as a policy organization, to be more connected with student and family-facing organizations,” said Shannon Nicholas, chief of staff at Colorado Succeeds. Nicholas also noted EIF’s relationship-building role in connecting funders to organizations they continue to work with today: “Some of those partners that we now work with deeply came from some of EIF’s work. There’s been continuing projects and other avenues to work with folks, in part because of EIF work.”

Funders also found value in working alongside peer organizations in Colorado. “Particularly on the innovation side of things, being able to collaborate was really valuable to us as an organization, to develop deeper relationships with the other funders, to understand where they were coming from and their unique perspectives,” said Donovan of RootED. The Gates Family Foundation, which shepherded much of the EIF process, indicated that the collaboration has informed its long-term approach: “We had traditionally not been open to funding out-of-system approaches to teaching and learning. We are now in our strategic plan carving out some space to support pilots in that area. The EIF opened our eyes to some of the really innovative things that are happening.”

EIF Grantee Spotlights

The Dream Keepers Project (Fort Morgan, Colorado)

In applying to EIF, Taylor Jordan sought to create her dream job: running a near-peer mentoring program focused on providing support to students during the transition from high school to college. The Dream Keepers Project (now called College Access Navigators) focused specifically on newcomers (i.e., refugees and immigrants relatively new to the U.S.), students of color, ELLs, and first-generation students.

Through her role as an ELL teacher, as a board member of a nonprofit supporting refugee and immigrant families, and supporting first-generation students at postsecondary institutions, Jordan developed an understanding of the educational barriers facing newcomers, from staying on track academically to being included in the community to pursuing higher education. Jordan also recognized that students were experiencing feelings of disconnectedness from pandemic-induced isolation.

With these challenges in mind, Jordan used a \$20,000 EIF grant to hire three students she met through her work at Morgan Community College (MCC) in Fort Morgan, Colorado, to serve in the inaugural cohort of Dream Keeper Project mentors. One mentor focused on supporting newcomer students at Fort Morgan High School, another mentor helped facilitate the school's diversity club and helped students access concurrent enrollment opportunities, and the third helped students at MCC find tutoring support. Although each mentor had a specific focus area, Jordan asked all three to prioritize building connections with students and identifying those struggling in isolation.

EIF funding was critical in helping Jordan get the Dream Keepers Project off the ground and in building her confidence to pursue additional funding to grow the program. "EIF funding gave me the freedom to try what I think would work," Jordan said. "Then those three mentors have also been able to step up and step into these other really exciting places and positions."

The Fremont Multidistrict Initiative (Fremont County, Colorado)

In 2019, leaders from Canon City RE-1, Cotopaxi RE-3, and Fremont RE-2 school districts started meeting routinely for coffee, eventually pooling resources to provide students with access to more learning opportunities than any one district could provide alone. When this group of districts won an EIF grant, they used the funds to formalize a partnership among themselves and Pueblo Community College. As Dr. Brenda Krage, superintendent of Fremont School District RE-2, described it, “We wanted to work together because it’s just hard to do all of this work in isolation. Working together allows us to offer much more for our students.”

Although not directly addressing a COVID-19-related need, the Fremont Multidistrict Initiative — the new name for this group of partners — used its \$15,000 EIF grant as a flexible pool of funding to help the collaborative keep momentum while battling the chaos caused by the pandemic. For example, grant funds covered the legal fees associated with creating a 501(c)(3) and drawing up and revising contracts among all entities. Dr. Krage emphasized the value of the flexibility of EIF funding: “It isn’t a budget item that has to be spent by June 30. We can use it through the duration of the project. And so when we’ve gotten to a spot where we needed a little bit of money for technical assistance, we have that there.”

The Fremont Multidistrict Initiative also benefited from technical assistance and grant writing support from Empower Schools. “With this pandemic, we were just upside down, and this work could have so easily gotten lost and set aside,” said Dr. Krage. “But really, because we have access to Empower Schools through EIF, we were able to keep moving, keep accomplishing and doing amongst all this other chaos.”

The Fremont Multidistrict Initiative also went on to win a PDS grant and partnered with Empower to submit a RISE proposal. Despite not receiving a RISE grant, the Fremont Multidistrict Initiative worked with the Gates Family Foundation to craft a leaner version of their RISE proposal to shop around with other funders. To date, the Fremont Multidistrict Initiative has received philanthropic funding to support the creation of a medical health care career pathway and the development of a water management program across all three districts.

The Vilas School District RE-5 (Vilas, Colorado)

The Vilas School District RE-5 received \$6,500 from EIF to help support its growing home-school options program, referred to as the Vilas Options Program. The Vilas Options Program provides part-time students in the district and across Colorado with online courses and extracurricular activities to supplement their home-school program. Vilas has partnered with My Tech High to provide access to a wide range of coursework to supplement the content home-school parents provide. My Tech High also provides families with technology funds to purchase new computers and other software or equipment and gives access to in-person learning opportunities (e.g., field trips, service opportunities). Since its inception during the 2019-2020 academic year, the Vilas Options Program has grown from 35 to 135 students.

The Vilas School District RE-5 used its EIF grant to plan for the anticipated growth of the Vilas Options Program in the 2020-21 academic year due to the rising demand for home-schooling options amid the pandemic. The district also used EIF funding to help expand access to the program. Finally, EIF funding served as a vote of confidence from funders and gave district leaders the confidence that the Vilas Options Program was headed in the right direction.

One district leader hopes to combine the supplemental content delivered remotely by the Vilas Options Program with in-person learning opportunities through local innovation centers, where students can visit to engage in hands-on projects. This leader also envisions a statewide network of mentors capable of providing students with one-on-one support. To realize this vision, the Vilas Options Program would need substantial and ongoing financial support from the philanthropic community and a state policy environment that makes hybrid learning feasible. “Families would not be confined by the district that they live in or the area that they live in, but that there will be more opportunities for the uniqueness of their education and for the students’ individual goals,” said Abby Pettinger, director of innovations and principal of the Vilas Elementary School in Vilas School District RE-5.

Lessons Learned

EIF resulted in a series of lessons learned that may inform the design of similar philanthropic initiatives in the future.

First, a key aim of EIF was to support and learn about the innovation taking place in response to the disruptions caused by the pandemic, particularly in education systems (e.g., schools and districts). In the end, EIF didn't attract as many schools and districts as hoped for, and most of the system-level actors that received funding already had a relationship with a funder involved in the initiative. In interviews, some hypothesized that the eligible funding amount³ may not have been high enough to draw the interest of schools and districts. Others felt the shorter-than-usual proposal timeline may have precluded some system actors from submitting grant proposals, due to capacity issues or because large education systems typically cannot move that quickly. As Alessi at Empower School summarized, "I think more nimble, direct-service organizations could perhaps more easily contemplate how to direct an immediate grant to maximize impact and were well positioned to apply right away. Those working more at the system level might have been less compelled by the relatively small grant amounts and often need more time to align key stakeholders on how to best direct new resources." Thus, **funders learned that the funding levels and timelines of future initiatives should be tailored** to the schools, districts, and consortia they hope to work with.

Second, despite the intentions of the coordinating funders and intermediary organizations, EIF didn't receive a single grant proposal from a rural organization led by a person of color, nor did the selection committee necessarily represent the racial and ethnic diversity of the students and communities the initiative was seeking to target and impact. "There are many rural areas in Colorado that are predominantly white, but there are more diverse rural areas as well, especially rural communities where there are many Hispanic and Latino folks," Abby Schaller, senior program officer at the Gates Family Foundation. "We just didn't see diverse leaders come to us from those rural places."

Interviewees suggested that future work should include a well-planned, thoughtful effort to reach organizations led by people of color in rural areas. This might include prioritizing the creation of a diverse grant selection committee, building support among trusted community partners, and soliciting help from community leaders of color to spread the word. Community-based communication channels can help ensure that funding reaches target applicants, including a racially diverse set of students furthest from opportunity and those who seek to serve them.

Finally, participating EIF philanthropies hoped to fund work that responded in uncommon ways to both long-standing and emerging challenges posed by the pandemic, but EIF didn't establish a clear definition for the kind of innovation these funders hoped to enable. Additionally, applicants may have been focused on the urgency to meet basic needs, especially during the very early days of the pandemic, as opposed to designing disruptive or divergent solutions.

Specifically, the funders we spoke with suggested a range of refinements that may lead to more innovation in future initiatives:

- Define innovation, set a vision for success, and clarify priorities for learning.
- Prioritize small-scale, bold, and divergent solutions that could be scaled in the future.
- Provide upfront planning and implementation support, along with opportunities for grantees to reflect on and learn from their work.
- Narrow who can apply or create sub-selection committees focused on certain content areas or applicant types.
- Solicit proposals from either out-of-system or in-system innovations.
- Recruit an applicant pool that is diverse, inclusive, and representative of the students in rural Colorado.

At the same time, interviewees noted that some of these refinements may sacrifice what made EIF unique (e.g., fast-paced, low barrier to entry, openness and transparency from funders, and a focus on collective learning rather than grantee accountability), and architects of future philanthropic initiatives of this nature should consider how each of these refinements works for or against these unique attributes. The president of Colorado Succeeds, Scott Laband, summed it up, "I think the idea of a shared definition of innovation is a little bit in tension with this desire to try not to focus people in a certain direction, but I really believe that the best solutions are going to be the ones identified by people on the ground. That's what is going to create a lot of diversity of solutions."

In total, just over \$1 million was distributed to organizations and individuals that submitted an EIF grant proposal, either through the initiative itself or from outside funders who took an interest in supporting unfunded project proposals. Beyond reaching so many organizations and individuals in such a short amount of time, EIF is notable for several reasons, including its simple and accelerated application process and the relatively open-ended approach from the philanthropic community.

Conclusion

Colorado's EIF, PDS, and RESCHOOL Colorado's Learning Dollar initiative were all relatively small-scale grant initiatives that shared several of the same characteristics. All three initiatives provided a relatively low barrier to entry to ease the upfront costs for potential applicants and increase the likelihood of funding reaching communities and student populations with the greatest needs. Each initiative represented collaborations among multiple funders and intermediary organizations – forging new connections and ongoing partnerships between these organizations and the grantees they supported. Each initiative also provided flexible grants to organizations and individuals that allowed them to use funds to address their unique needs, without having to adjust their priorities to fit the grantmakers' goals.

The promising practices and lessons learned from these philanthropic initiatives are particularly relevant as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve in unpredictable ways. Although it's unclear whether or to what extent in-person schooling will be disrupted in the future, funders should prepare to meet the moment again by forgoing business-as-usual grantmaking practices and designing initiatives that address the most immediate needs facing communities. In rural Colorado, [new survey data](#) show some of the most pressing needs include but are not limited to staffing shortages, providing mental health support for students, and providing academic support to address the impact of interrupted instruction.

One takeaway from these philanthropic initiatives seems particularly important as Colorado funders consider ways to support rural schools and communities: Greater collaboration among funders, intermediary organizations, and grantees in designing and implementing philanthropic initiatives benefits everyone involved, including schools and families. At a minimum, these collaborative efforts test assumptions about grantmaking, allow funders to learn from one another's perspectives and practices, and accelerate innovation in the philanthropic community. They can also lead to new or strengthened partnerships between funders and the communities they hope to impact. At their best, they do all of the above while also meaningfully increasing rural schools' access to the financial resources necessary to sustain and grow work designed to meet student needs.

Endnotes

- 1 For more information, see “RESCHOOL’s Learning Dollars Work,” RESCHOOL Colorado, October 19, 2021, https://www.reschoolcolorado.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/RESCHOOL-Learning-Dollars-Work_2014-2021_10.2021.pdf.
- 2 “Article 86.1: Learning Enrichment and Academic Progress (LEAP) Program” (Proposition 119), Colorado Secretary of State, <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/Initiatives/titleBoard/filings/2021-2022/25Final.pdf>.
- 3 The request for proposals indicated most grants would be between \$1,000 and \$4,000 but could be as much as \$50,000 – the average award was \$9,406, and awards ranged from \$2,700 to \$20,000.

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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.

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