



# Capacity Building for Strategic Learning Using an Intermediary-Led Grantee Cohort Model: *Recommendations for Funders*

October 2021

Emily Gardner, Emma Pottinger, Ramya Tallapragada, Alex Resch,  
and Virginia Knechtel

*This presentation is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.*

## Context

**From May 2020 to September 2021, Mathematica and Catalyst:Ed partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a set of nine K–12 education grantees for the [Capacity Building for Strategic Learning \(CBSL\) pilot initiative](#).**

The partnership defined equity-centered strategic learning as the set of efforts that enables organizations to set goals that contribute to increased educational equity for Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty; establish hypotheses on how to reach their goals; build strong organizational culture, practices and systems that support implementing and testing those hypotheses; and use information to improve their model on an ongoing basis. Critically, the partnership believes that strong equity-centered strategic learning is demonstrated when equity is considered in not only the organization's goal but also in its learning and decision-making approach. The initiative's goal was to strengthen grantee capacity for equity-centered strategic learning by helping grantees scope projects in their area of need, matching grantees with providers that could help build organizational capacity, delivering cohort learning activities, and offering thought partnership.

**Challenge:**  
The status quo funding model—requiring specific outputs from grantees in exchange for grant dollars—does not best support grantee learning or impact

- **Nonprofits often struggle to prioritize building internal capacity to do learning work, though they may desire to and doing so may strengthen their work**
  - Though internal learning work may help nonprofit grantees achieve their goals, it is often not funded or required, and thus is not prioritized by grantees, which have limited staff time and resources to allocate
- **Power dynamics between funders and grantees may also hinder authentic internal learning**
  - Achieving concrete outputs through a grant period (e.g., change in student outcomes) is not guaranteed when the focus is on learning
  - This may pose a challenge to the typical grantmaking model
- **Grantees are often interested in connecting and learning from one another, but they may not have the infrastructure, time, or capacity to collaborate**

The CBSL pilot suggests that strategic learning cohorts—led by an intermediary—offer a solution

- **Strategic learning is the set of efforts that enables organizations to set goals; establish hypotheses on how to reach their goals; build strong organizational culture, practices and systems; and use information to improve their model on an ongoing basis**
  - By improving service delivery and strengthening continuous learning and improvement, grantees may be better able to equitably improve student outcomes through their work
- **Funding strategic learning, including using an intermediary and building a cohort learning community, serves as a promising model to help grantees “learn how to learn” and devote the time and resources they need to build internal capacity**
  - Supporting strategic learning may help grantees work toward their desired impact and in turn, better meet the funder’s goals

# The Capacity Building for Strategic Learning Pilot Initiative involved 3 workstreams



## Scoping and Matching

- Catalyst:Ed adapted its capacity framework to articulate the key capacities needed for strategic learning, facilitated self-reflection activities with the grantees, developed project scopes for capacity building, and matched grantees with providers that would execute the scope of work
- Grantees receive resources to initiate project with provider support



## Grantee Support

- Mathematica, the intermediary, led monthly check-ins with each grantee to gauge progress on work with the provider, support grantees, and learn about the grantee experience



## Learning Activities

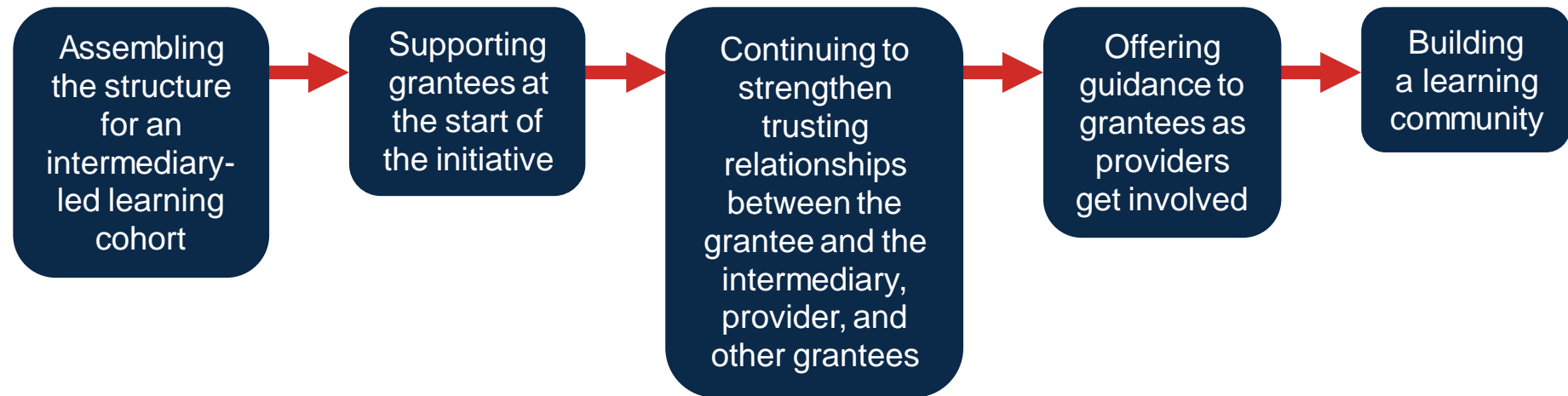
- Mathematica and partners offered learning activities to aid grantee capacity building
- Activities included webinars, peer-to-peer collaboration, and resource sharing

## Overview of this document

- **This document outlines key takeaways from the CBSL pilot initiative**
  - The recommendations for funders throughout this document came from an analysis of the pilot grantees' experience
  - The analysis drew from regular grantee feedback surveys, one-on-one check-ins, semi-structured interviews, and group discussions over the year of the initiative
  - Grantees had the opportunity to view the findings from the analysis throughout the initiative and provide feedback
  - For more information: see detailed [CBSL pilot findings](#) and initiative theory of change in the appendix of this document
- **The rest of this document summarizes lessons learned from the pilot initiative and resulting recommendations for funders looking to support similar capacity building for strategic learning initiatives**

## Navigating this document

The recommendations for funders herein are organized by the following stages of a strategic learning initiative:



# Recommendations for funders seeking to support strategic learning



## Begin by assembling the structure for a strategic learning cohort

### **Recognize the importance of funding strategic learning as its own type of grant**

- To begin a strategic learning initiative, funders should dedicate grant funds to an exclusively strategic learning project, not as part of other grants

### **Set up an intermediary**

- The intermediary will ease power dynamics between the funder and grantees, build a trusting supportive relationship, and provide guidance on scopes of work and provider contracts

### **Select a grantee cohort**

- Grouping grantees in a cohort can enhance their strategic learning experience
- The size, age, or geographic location of the organization did not matter for successful grantee strategic learning and cohort participation

### **Set expectations for grantees**

- At the start of the initiative, provide clear expectations on the timeline, expected level of effort, how grantees will create their scope of work, how selecting a strategic learning provider will work, and what cohort learning activities they will be expected to attend (if any)

## Support the intermediary in preparing grantees at the start of the initiative

### **Encourage or require grantees to do a “pre-project”**

- Conducting pre-work to determine where they lacked strategic learning capacity and identify linkages to other internal work set grantees up for success
- An optional short self-reflection activity, which the intermediary can lead, can help grantees identify strengths and areas for growth in strategic learning

### **Lay the foundation for the right grantee staff to be involved**

- Building strategic learning capacity is often too much work for only one person
- Ideally, at least one person with decision-making authority and one program staffer would be involved, as strategic learning work often intersects with critical organizational decisions, such as building theories of change or strategic planning

### **Set up monthly check-in calls**

- Ensure the same intermediary staff consistently work with the same grantees in order to build a trusting relationship and maximize the benefits of check-ins for grantees

### **Keep grantee capacity limitations in mind when planning**

- Pilot participants cited limited staff time and capacity as a top issue. Even though they had the desire to prioritize strategic learning work, it can often feel challenging to do so.
- Anticipate, understand, and plan around grantee constraints. For example, reduce compliance activities to ease burden on grantees.

**Continue to strengthen trusting relationships with the intermediary, provider, and other grantees in the cohort throughout the initiative**

### **Devote time to finessing the scope of work upfront to maximize internal buy-in at grantee organizations**

- Before a provider's scope of work goes public, encourage grantees to gain buy-in from their organizations' leadership
- This may help prevent internal dilemmas surrounding the purpose of the work later and increase the likelihood of a productive engagement

### **Strive to ease power dynamics**

- Funder–grantee power dynamics were on grantees' minds in the pilot initiative and can be antagonistic to a culture of authentic strategic learning
- Acknowledging these dynamics explicitly and instituting an intermediary can help soothe this tension

### **Emphasize that the initiative is about the process, not a product**

- Instilling a culture of learning can feel against the status quo for grantees
- Some grantees in the pilot initiative still felt pressure to provide output to the funder, despite the clear purpose of the initiative to improve capacity

### **Help grantees notice opportunities to integrate strategic learning into other work**

- Building connections between strategic learning and other grants, internal work, or the grantee's impact goals makes a culture of strategic learning more sustainable and rooted in the fabric of the organization
- Encourage grantees to keep various staff members informed throughout the work so colleagues can stay updated and engage with the strategic learning process

## Offer guidance to grantees for working with providers

### Support grantees that may need more guidance in selecting and working with a provider

- Some grantees may be unsure how to best select a provider to work with or how to navigate working alongside them, especially when related to potentially sensitive, equity-focused topics
- Grantees that set very clear expectations with their provider upfront about *how* they wanted to work together had notably successful engagements
  - For example, management style, frequency of meetings, number of staff members who will have direct contact with the provider, theoretical versus concrete nature of the work, stage at which the provider will help them apply their project to their school partners or programs

### Build in flexibility and room to pivot into the scopes of work

- Understand the scope of work may shift over the course of the initiative
- Consider intentionally seeking out providers that can be flexible
  - Several grantees in the pilot initiative chose providers partially based on their self-disclosed flexibility
- Providers' ability to be responsive to grantee needs is crucial
  - Many pilot grantees started to unearth more complexities and needs throughout the initiative and appreciated when their provider was adaptable

### Understand there may be excess demand for sophisticated equity-centered strategic learning providers

- The networks or pools of providers that intermediaries and grantees access for the initiative could affect whether providers are able to meet the demand for equity expertise
  - Based on the network of providers the pilot initiative had access to, some pilot grantees did not find their ideal equity-focused provider readily available

## Build a learning community throughout the initiative

### **Build a trusting relationship between grantees**

- The intermediary should track grantees' needs and learning interests and invest time and effort into creating a productive learning community
- Pilot grantees had a strong desire to continually connect with each other in real time and learn from the other organizations, while not wanting to waste time on vague, high-level learning
- The intermediary can “play matchmaker” and encourage certain pairs or trios of grantees to connect over specific shared topics that come up in check-in calls
- Candid, casual conversations between grantees about their organizations' work and experiences with strategic learning were cited as highlights of the pilot initiative

### **Create tailored cohort learning activities to support grantees' strategic learning work**

- Design learning activities to meet grantees' needs, both in content and format
  - Collect feedback frequently and consistently and adapt accordingly
- View [Mathematica's toolkit on building learning cohorts](#) for strategic learning for more information

### **Overall, anticipate being flexible and agile to prioritize responsiveness to grantee needs**

- Pilot grantees appreciated having an intermediary that authentically listens and having a curated learning experience designed for them

# Find out more

[CBSL Initiative webpage](#)

[Findings from the CBSL Initiative](#)

[Capacity Building Toolkit](#)

[Learning Cohort Toolkit](#)

# Questions?

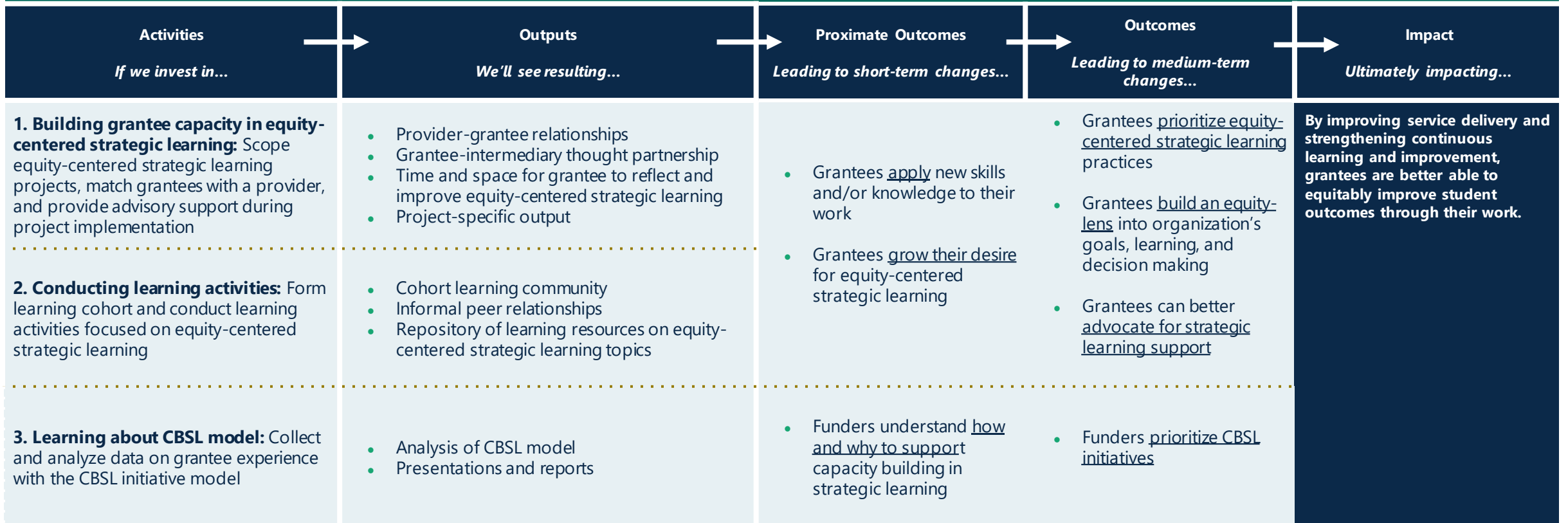
Alexandra Resch: [AResch@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:AResch@mathematica-mpr.com)

Mariana Preciado: [Mariana.Preciado@gatesfoundation.org](mailto:Mariana.Preciado@gatesfoundation.org)

# Appendix: Pilot initiative theory of change

**PROBLEM STATEMENT:** There is not sufficient support for improving organizations' capacity for equity-centered strategic learning that will help them better achieve their goals.

**VISION:** We believe that the Capacity Building for Strategic Learning (CBSL) initiative can help provide grantees with learning support and tools to build capacity for equity-centered strategic learning and generate evidence to investigate the argument that capacity building around equity-centered strategic learning matters and that funders can provide effective support in that space.



## CBSL HYPOTHESES:

- 1a. There is a disconnect between what grantees would authentically like to learn about and what they are learning in order to report to funders.
- 1b. Funders can provide grantees the space and resources to sustainably build an equity lens further into the fabric of their organization's goals, learning, and decision making.
2. Funders can effectively support capacity building by offering funding, cohort time, engaging an intermediary, and trusting the grantee knows what it needs better than the funder does.
3. If we create peer learning activities that are engaging and responsive to needs, then grantees will be better equipped to improve equity-centered strategic learning.