

Deeper Learning Advocacy Cluster Evaluation

Key Findings

November 2013



Introduction

In August 2013, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Education Program engaged ORS Impact to conduct a cluster evaluation of its advocacy work.¹ The evaluation aimed to illuminate opportunities relevant to the Deeper Learning portfolio's role and influence in the education advocacy and policy landscape. Findings offer actionable insights and raise strategic questions that can inform the Hewlett Deeper Learning team's decision making.

Findings presented in this memo are based on 27 interviews, which ORS Impact conducted in September and October of 2013. Interview respondents included representatives from nine Deeper Learning grantee organizations (n=13) and key informants at the federal (n=5) and state (n=9) levels, specifically California, Kentucky, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin, who could shed light on the education advocacy and policy landscape. Given interviews were conducted with a subset of grantees and in many cases, mid-grant, feedback is intended to be directional.

Background

The Education Program makes grants to improve education by expanding the reach of openly available educational resources, improving California education policies, and by supporting "Deeper Learning."² Deeper learning is an umbrella term for the skills, dispositions, and knowledge that students must possess to succeed in 21st century jobs and civic life. At its heart is a set of competencies students must master in order to develop a keen understanding of academic content and apply their knowledge to problems in the classroom and on the job.

The Deeper Learning framework includes six competencies that are essential to prepare students to achieve at high levels:

- Master core academic content
- Think critically and solve complex problems
- Work collaboratively
- Communicate effectively
- Learn how to learn
- Develop academic mindsets³

The program's grantmaking supports organizations that work to influence and improve both education policies and classroom practices, helping more schools successfully focus on Deeper Learning.⁴

¹ The Hewlett Foundation does not lobby or earmark its funds for prohibited lobbying activities, as defined in the federal tax laws. The Foundation's funding for advocacy work is limited to permissible forms of support, such as general operating grants that grantees can allocate at their discretion and project support grants for nonlobbying activities (e.g., public education and nonpartisan research).

² The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Education Program. Retrieved from: <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education-program>, November 2013

³ The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. (April 2013). Deeper Learning Competencies. Retrieved from: http://www.hewlett.org/uploads/documents/Deeper_Learning_Defined__April_2013.pdf, November 2013.

⁴ The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. (December 2012). Deeper Learning Strategic Plan Summary Education Program. Retrieved from: http://www.hewlett.org/uploads/documents/EducationProgram_Deep_Learning_Strategy.pdf, November 2013.



Key Learnings from the Evaluation

1. Among interviewees, there is high awareness and buy-in around Deeper Learning as a concept that will prepare students to succeed in college, careers, and life.

All interviewees were bought into the concept of Deeper Learning, as well as the importance of Deeper Learning components.

Grantee organizations were fundamentally aligned with the foundation's Deeper Learning priorities, though some demonstrated a more clear alignment than others.

“Another place we’re working a lot is around competency-based education and tying that to Deeper Learning as a method or a means for students to reach levels of Deeper Learning. Because of the ways competency-based education can personalize education for students; help them develop in a more personalized way than the factory-based model that schools have been operating with.”

“Our work is very aligned because the [grantee organization] is focused on making sure that every student is college, career, and citizenship ready.”

State level decision makers generally had high awareness and prioritization of Deeper Learning and related concepts. At the federal level, awareness of Deeper Learning was relatively high; to some, the concept was long-standing, and to others, relatively new. Key informants revealed that the issue is increasingly relevant, in some instances “pervasive” to their work in the education space.

2. There is an interest among advocates and decision makers we spoke with for shared terminology, and some ambivalence about whether Deeper Learning should be the term.

There are currently a handful of terms being used within this movement; among them, “Common Core,” “College and Career Readiness,” “21st Century Skills,” “Critical Thinking,” “Competency-Based Assessment,” “Non-Cognitive,” and “Personalized Learning.” There is low utilization of “Deeper Learning” as a term at the policy level, and the aforementioned terms are frequently used in place of “Deeper Learning.” Although the related concepts are deeply aligned with one another, there is inconsistency of use across (and sometimes within) advocacy organizations. One key informant suggested,

“There is a variety of terms that I think apply the same thing, but there is not a clear definition of the differences between these terms;” another confirmed,



“I just don’t think people mean the same thing when they use these terms ... it shows the disconnect between them. So, I don’t know if there’s a true mastery or true shared understanding about vocabulary.”

In their advocacy efforts, grantees found there was a need to use more digestible terms for, or straightforward discourse around, Deeper Learning. Messaging also tend to be audience-specific.

“[Deeper Learning] takes some explanation on what people mean by it. Overall, I think the messaging is a bit problematic due to that initial hurdle of explaining what Deeper Learning is.”

“Sometimes depending on the level of knowledge of the audience we get even broader and say “instruction that’s student centered and helps develop strong academic and 21st century skills;” some language that might be a little bit more familiar to the audience.

Federal level key informants reported that terminology such as “College and Career Readiness” is less politically charged in the federal arena.

Interviews highlighted a clear opportunity for advocates of Deeper Learning and related concepts to narrow messaging and adopt shared terminology. That being said, there is ambivalence that Deeper Learning should be *the* term associated

with this movement. None of the interviewees fully discredited the term “Deeper Learning;” the most critical descriptions of the term were that it was “not explosive,” “not fully inclusive,” or that individuals “glaze over” it. However, others described it as “a helpful framework” and one that is “broadly understood.” Key informants often directly attributed Deeper Learning to the Hewlett Foundation; in some instances, decision makers had learned about Deeper Learning from foundation staff; other decision makers reported that the term had been around for years and that the foundation was “repackaging” or “crystallizing” it.

3. Interviewees recognized Common Core as a vehicle for moving the Deeper Learning agenda in states and described momentum in states at this stage around successful implementation.

Common Core State Standards, which are widely adopted (by 45 states and the District of Columbia), were perceived by key informants as a vehicle to Deeper Learning adoption and implementation. Although the two concepts are not entirely analogous, interviewees agree that Common Core is one way that Deeper Learning is already in play. The foundation’s Deeper Learning team, too, sees the considerable adoption of Common Core Standards by the states as “an enormous step forward toward the goal of preparing students for the future.”⁵

⁵ The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Deeper Learning: Is Deeper Learning Really Possible for All Students? Retrieved from: <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education-program/deeper-learning>, November 2013.



There was a high interest for the emphasis in the education space to shift from the adoption of supportive policies to the need to successfully implement existing policies, namely Common Core State Standards. Key informants shed light on this transition.

“For at least a decade education reform has been overly dominated by policy—advocacy around policy. ... Now my hypothesis is that policy and advocacy still matter, but the real shifts we want to see is the deeper shift of practice within and through those systems. How do we actually see the change in teaching practices? The advocacy still matters, but it is much more of a balance at the moment between policy-advocacy work and integration within systems.”

“For me, it’s moving ... from making policy to implementing policy, and that is a very different stretch. And, I think that’s what foundations need to think about.”

Proponents are eager to see policies realized. Not only is implementation timely, but there is a window in which implementation ought to occur.

“When you start thinking about higher standards, you innately brush up against how are you going to meet these higher standards. I think the next step is about how do we just engage in a deeper way.”

State level key informants are “cautiously optimistic” about the implementation of Common Core and report that there are a “cohort of states anxious to take this next step.”

4. There have been small wins at the federal level, but key informants describe less optimism about seeing significant changes in that venue.

There have been a few major “wins” for Deeper Learning at the federal level, specifically District Race to the Top run by the Department of Education. Key informants highlighted this Deeper Learning victory.

“The most obvious [change in policy] is the latest Race to the Top application [which] was focused on Deeper Learning. The literature, especially teacher literature, is increasingly focused on Deeper Learning.”

“District Race to the Top—they had an unbelievably clear language in the application that was nearly identical to the Hewlett definition of Deeper Learning.”

Additionally, states describe waivers from the No Child Left Behind law as strategic vehicles for including Deeper Learning aspects into Common Core implementation. There was an agreement that these “small wins” (e.g., funding for assessments, technology, and professional development) present better opportunity than something “big.”

Given the political gridlock in Washington, there was little optimism and thus, political will for policy change or implementation at the federal level.

“At the national level it’s extremely difficult and frustrating given the overall climate of where we are both fiscally and politically. Everybody knows that nothing is getting done, so there’s not much strong interest and desire to promote a lot and a lot of Members aren’t focusing or bothering with it because they know it’s not happening.”



Looking Forward

- **It appears to be a ripe time to coalesce groups into an advocacy coalition around the Deeper Learning agenda.**

Grantees and key informants gave indications that an advocacy coalition would be timely. Given the sense of urgency around state level implementation, a tighter, more focused advocacy campaign could realize the promise of recently-passed policies. While none of the grantees interviewed identified themselves as working within an existing Deeper Learning advocacy coalition, data around the existing relationships across grantees suggest a strong starting point for establishing a more formal coalition.

“Hewlett has done a good job getting all the pieces together for the coalition. But the challenge is getting the balance of capacity to alignment of Deeper Learning among the key coalition players. This could be a necessary function of ramping up.”

There was a consensus that the Deeper Learning portfolio of grantees (or potential advocacy coalition) would need a shared definition of Deeper Learning, as well as a clearly defined advocacy agenda and roles. One key informant called attention to the untapped coordination.

“Some of them [groups] really don’t pay attention to this agenda and others really are more engaged—not necessarily in the Deeper Learning agenda, but in other strategies that would support Deeper Learning.”

Grantees, in particular, emphasized the foundation’s potential for forming an effective advocacy coalition.

“I think at times the foundation has done the best to put funds in the hands of many groups but maybe not a clear plan of how we are all supposed to come together. We need a more coordinated effort and better understanding of what we are all doing. If those are in place, then we can be very strategic.”

- **There is an opportunity to develop champions and broaden voices in support of Deeper Learning.**

Key informants expressed interest in hearing from a more diverse set of voices on Deeper Learning issues, including:

- Higher Education
- Business Community
- Parents

According to key informants, this range of on-the-ground perspectives would lend greater credibility to a Deeper Learning coalition.



- **Advocates and state level informants saw activity related to supports for Common Core and Deeper Learning implementation as the current opportunity and a next step for continued advocacy.**

Interviewees indicated that examples of successful implementation, including model schools and districts along with student outcomes data, make the case for Common Core and, thus, Deeper Learning. As one grantee confirmed, “*The more evidence behind what we are talking about the easier it will be sell it.*” One of the greatest challenges, according to grantees and key informants, is the lack of “proof points.” There is a strong desire among grantees and decision makers for said proof points that will build momentum around Common Core implementation.

“It’s about getting some good data. Really good numbers that can make the case for this and presenting it really effectively and clearly.”

“Deeper Learning is now huge with the implementation of Common Core standards. We all need a couple of states to propose and then implement a model of this. ... We need demonstration states, just a few districts in each that can assess for skills and maintain this.”

Key informants also had various outlooks on what it will take to implement and sustain Common Core and related policies. Among the suggestions are funding for assessments, technology, and professional development.

“It’s the real orchestration of policies to implement that is the problem. You need a lot of professional development, more technology, new materials, new assessments, public understanding, all of those sorts of things.”



Conclusion

The cluster evaluation of the foundation’s Deeper Learning advocacy sought to understand the portfolio’s role and influence in the education advocacy and policy landscape. Broadly, we found good alignment to, and awareness of, the foundation’s concept of Deeper Learning. Given the state of the field related to Common Core and the kinds of policies that can support the foundation’s goals related to helping students be prepared for college, careers, and life, the time may be right to form a tighter, more formal advocacy coalition using better-shared definitions of Deeper Learning to build momentum around implementation—both of the Deeper Learning elements contained within the Common Core and of “proof points” that address the full set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.