PRINCIPLES OF GRANTMAKING FOR EDUCATION EQUITY AND JUSTICE

Grantmakers FOR EDUCATION

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SUMMARY

Grantmakers for Education has prepared the Principles of Grantmaking for Education Equity and Justice to affirm a set of attitudes, beliefs and practices that, when carefully considered and conscientiously applied, can support education philanthropy in realizing its core purpose: to nourish human potential and improve the human condition. Providing both inspiration, sensibility and guidance, these principles offer an approach to grantmaking that can productively foster education equity and justice.

The project of advancing education equity and justice through philanthropy is a project of democratic purpose – a durable commitment to education as a vibrant public good and doorway to opportunity and agency. Philanthropy has long played a role in this project so most of all, we share these principles as motivation to, in the words of Dr. Ruha Benjamin in *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want*, "remember to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within."

This purpose – and this project – give us direction. These principles give us structure.

The *Principles of Grantmaking for Education Equity and Justice* are comprised of ten anchoring actions:

Understand the Education Ecosystem and Landscape
Check Your Assumptions
Commit to Clarity and Transparency
Expand Your Analysis of Learner Success
Figure Out Your Goals
Form a Multidimensional View of Change
Affirm Your Goals in Broader Organizational Practice and Grant Operations
Mobilize All Resources at Your Disposal
Reflect Deeply and Deliberately
Persist in the Long Arc of Change

While the set of principles is important, individually, their relevance may depend on the scope and style of a funder or philanthropic organization's work. We believe all grantmakers should embrace and integrate these principles as best they can with their unique resources and capabilities. And they should do so with the conviction that equity and justice work is unconditional as well as the understanding that they are embarking on a journey of continuous learning and adaptation.

We do not intend these principles to serve as a checklist of activities or to suggest that grantmaking is a simple, mechanical process. Nor do we intend to suggest that all these activities must be done for the effort and work to matter. Instead, we hope the principles challenge grantmakers to reflect on why and how they pursue their work, and the type of support they need. And that grantmakers will breathe new life into them over time.

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INTRODUCTION

Educational equity and justice are foundational to a vibrant, inclusive and democratic society—one in which every individual can lead a life rich in opportunity, possibility and agency. When education systems work equitably, they can disrupt generational cycles of poverty and ensure that a learner's background or zip code does not determine their future. And when they do not, they entrench the very inequities they were meant to overcome.

Education is more than academic attainment; it is a lifelong, multidimensional process through which individuals develop knowledge, skills, values and a sense of agency. It shapes not only economic outcomes, but also civic participation, social cohesion and democratic engagement. As affirmed in Brown v. Board of Education, education is "the very foundation of good citizenship." Yet, for many—particularly learners of color, learners with disabilities, learners living in poverty and learners from historically marginalized or divested communities—this foundation has been uneven and unjust. Persistent disparities in access, opportunity and outcomes reflect deeply rooted structural inequities that continue to limit who can fully participate in and benefit from society.

While equality offers the same resources to all, equity requires meeting learners where they are—addressing systemic barriers and providing the tailored support every learner needs to thrive. And while education equity ensures that all learners have access to high-quality learning environments, diverse and enriching experiences, and the resources they need to exert agency and flourish, education justice goes further - calling for the dismantling of institutional barriers and the transformation of systems that perpetuate inequity. Without this work, disparities and bias in education experiences and outcomes will continue to reinforce broader social, political and economic inequalities.

The project of advancing education equity and justice through philanthropy is a project of democratic purpose – a durable commitment to education as a vibrant public good and doorway to opportunity and agency. This connection is not incidental; it is foundational. The right to education in this country has never been separable from the struggle for civil rights. From the fight to desegregate schools to the ongoing work of ensuring equitable access to resources, rigorous curricula and effective teaching, each generation's civil rights movement has understood that democracy is only as strong as its commitment to educating all its people, fully and fairly. Education is where young people first encounter the promise of self-governance – learning not just facts, but how to think critically, deliberate and participate in a shared civic life. When that promise is denied or diminished for some, it weakens the democratic fabric for all. Equity and justice in education, then, are not simply moral aspirations; they are the practical conditions under which a genuine democracy can exist and endure.

Grantmakers for Education believes that access to a well-resourced, responsive and innovative high-quality education ecosystem is both a civil right and a key component to achieving education equity and justice. Under these conditions, all learners may blossom and prosper in their classrooms, campuses and communities with the support of skilled, passionate and prepared educators, advisors and mentors. With support in place, all learners feel welcomed, nurtured, safe and ready to learn and grow.

Philanthropy has a unique and powerful role in using its investing, convening and influencing power to help incentivize and foster the conditions in which institutions and structures promote and enable opportunities for all learners to flourish. Past philanthropic practice rooted in equity-driven values must expand, while past harms rooted in Whiteness, ableism and paternalism must be repaired. What and who philanthropic organizations invest in matters, as do the many ways in which the field and its leaders operate.

At Grantmakers for Education, we maintain that education equity and justice should be the function of philanthropy in education. Toward this purpose, every element within the sector, and the interdependence among them, matters. What one donor, professional funder or trustee does within an organization matters to their colleagues' work, and what one philanthropic organization does may influence what another does. Certainly, individual funders and philanthropic organizations have among the most profound and direct impacts on service organizations and leaders. The beliefs and behaviors of funders and grantmaking organizations are leverage points – small, targeted actions with strong influence, that may not always be obvious but can create significant and lasting effects on the overall system's behavior. These principles activate the sector's leverage points.

Complementary paradigms and frameworks

Education and philanthropy encompass a range of paradigms and frameworks that translate worldviews and beliefs into individual and organizational behavior. The sectors have, to varying extents, embraced several approaches that resonate with these principles to help bring their equity goals to life, including (but certainly not limited to) trust-based philanthropy, human-centered design, emergent learning, equitable evaluation framework, and liberatory education and design. More information on these paradigms and frameworks is available in the report's accompanying online resource center.



Organizing logic

The ten principles should be understood and applied as an integrated, recursive, mutually reinforcing framework. In practice, education grantmakers will constantly move among these principles. While we expect that organizations may not engage all of them, the principles are in fact interrelated – they do not stand apart from one another; rather, they connect and converge in both concept and practice. It is when practiced together that funding organizations establish a solid foundation for their efforts to alleviate the many ways education inequity and injustice manifest in the policies and practices of learning spaces and systems.

The organizing logic of these principles presents them as interdependent capacities - domains of practice, not hierarchical or linear phases. There is also no starting point or finish line: completion is neither possible nor the goal. Rather, these capacities have multiple points and can be cultivated and deepened over time through ongoing practice.

Ways of using these principles

Without judgment or critique, grantmakers and funding organizations have a range of competencies, cultures and norms, and levels of comfort with advancing educational equity and justice. Interrogating concepts such as othering, belonging, inclusion, Whiteness, racial capitalism and equity, as they relate to race and ethnicity, caste, class and other markers of status and identity, is an effort to understand and navigate complexity in both ideology and lived experience. The Principles of Grantmaking for Education Equity and Justice were prepared with a range in interest, readiness, preparedness and capacity in mind.

We encourage funders to start where they are, or where they are otherwise able.

For some, this may mean internal work for themselves, with their teams or within their organizations. For others, action may start with external efforts in partnership with grantee organizations or other field leaders.

For some, this may mean using these principles as a benchmark against which to explore and evaluate individual and organizational beliefs. For others, attention may be immediately directed toward actions such as grant activity or public engagement in the sector.

For some, this may mean a focus on one principle and its utility for program strategy. For others, interest may start with relating these principles to the paradigms and frameworks they associate in their overall philanthropic strategy.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

Education | The ongoing process of developing knowledge, skills, mindsets, and values across all experiences that occur when people are learning. It happens in and beyond traditional systems including early learning settings, schools, colleges, community programs and workplaces, as well as before, during and after the school day.

Education philanthropy | A field that encompasses a wide variety of philosophies and strategies. It directs funding, convening power, research and influence to improve how people learn and lead throughout their lives. It focuses on the conditions of learning, growth and development, opportunity and leadership from birth through adulthood and across classrooms, campuses, homes, communities and workplaces.

Grantmaking | The science and art of allocating a range of capitals – financial, social, intellectual, moral and human. The craft of funding. Grantmaking practices embed philosophies and perspectives on decision-making, grantee engagement and grant evaluation and impact.

Equity | A condition created by providing learners with the resources they need to access, engage with and achieve a high-quality educational experience.

Justice | A condition created by addressing historically rooted, institutionally embedded barriers to education, underpinned by a belief in the right to an education that includes and extends beyond the acquisition of skills and knowledge to encourage dialogue, develop empathy and critically analyze experiences and the world to foster agency and civic engagement. Inherently, justice involves repair, reimagination and renewal.

Equity and Justice | Together, they are conditioned by systems of oppression as they work to expand systems of liberation. An intersectional analysis tells us that systems of oppression compound one another, and that equity and justice in education are attached to equity and justice in climate, housing, health, immigration, food, economic systems and more - all of which show up in education. Equity and justice have multiple dimensions, all of which require a race-conscious analysis to advance or, when absent, to address. It has been shown that ignoring processes of racialization, racial bias, systemic racism or racial discrimination leads to greater inequity in education.

System | Donella Meadows's systems framework defines a system as "an interconnected set of parts that is coherently organized in a way that it achieves something…[consisting] of three kinds of things: elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose." The parts both affect each other and together "… produce an effect that is different from the effect of each part on its own." Distinct parts interact in a complex, dynamic and ever-changing way.

Ecosystem | A dynamic, interconnected network of people, organizations and institutions whose relationships and shared contributions collectively shape outcomes and opportunities. An education ecosystem refers to the collaborative engagement among learners, educators, families, community organizations, education leaders, businesses and others to support learning and student success. A broader social ecosystem encompasses the intersection of living, working and learning, recognizing that cross-sector partnerships are essential to fostering inclusive community and economic development. Unlike a system, which is typically defined by formal structures, centralized coordination and fixed processes, an ecosystem is adaptive, relationship-driven and shaped by the interactions of many independent participants.

PRINCIPLES OF GRANTMAKING FOR EDUCATION EQUITY AND JUSTICE

Providing inspiration, sensibility and guidance, these principles offer an approach to grantmaking that, when carefully considered and conscientiously applied, can productively foster education equity and justice. These principles assume that every person has a right to a quality, life-enhancing educational experience that is rich in opportunity.

While the set of principles is important, individually, their relevance may depend on the scope and style of a funder or philanthropic organization's work. We believe all grantmakers should embrace and integrate these principles as best they can with their unique resources and capabilities. And they should do so with the conviction that equity and justice work is unconditional as well as the understanding that they are embarking on a journey of continuous learning and adaptation.

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Each principle is detailed in the pages that follow. A brief description is followed by illustrative practices and probing questions, with a sample of suggestions on when and how to use them. In addition, Grantmakers for Education has developed an online resource center for these *Principles of Grantmaking for Education Equity and Justice,* which will continue growing to include real-life examples and additional resources – books, videos and more – for deeper understanding and further exploration.

Understand the Education Ecosystem and Landscape You're In

Education funders operate within a complex and dynamic ecosystem that includes learners, families, educators, school and district leaders, community organizations, higher education institutions, policymakers, employers, advocates and governance bodies. Effective grantmaking requires a deep understanding of funders' connection to these stakeholders and how relationships, resources, policies and power shape educational opportunities and outcomes.

By recognizing the levers that influence teaching, learning, opportunity and development, funders can better identify policy opportunities and conditions for meaningful change. This understanding helps funders align their efforts with peers, policymakers, practitioners, families and community leaders to advance improvements in student learning, well-being, belonging and educational attainment.

Understanding one's place in the education landscape also helps funders avoid acting in isolation or pursuing strategies that are disconnected from local realities. It reduces the likelihood of repeating past mistakes and increases the potential for lasting impact.

Because education systems are shaped by history as well as current conditions, understanding the ecosystem cannot be assumed. While building relationships with unfamiliar or seemingly unaligned stakeholders may involve perceived risk, the greater risk is operating with incomplete knowledge that results from speaking with too few people, especially those furthest from opportunity. Funders must develop a deep understanding of the educational issues, relationships, successes, conflicts and inequities that have shaped learning opportunities in the past and continue to influence learners' experiences today. Such understanding is essential for making informed investments that contribute to more equitable and just educational futures.

Practices

- Explore the education ecosystem in which you and your work operate, including key policies, politics, players, power dynamics and lived conditions.
- Speak with stakeholders, listening for knowledge, insight and understanding.
- Name and map the early learning, K-12, higher education and community conditions, assets, accolades and tensions.
- Learn the histories of the places and spaces you seek to enter or are already working in.
- Identify not just what you know but what you don't know, then make a plan to address the latter.

Probing Questions

- What conditions most impact the field in which you work? What are the policies, politics, investments and technologies shaping those conditions? Are those conditions unique to one segment of the education continuum, or are they shared?
- What are the education outcomes that get the most attention? The least?
- Who have you connected with already within and across stakeholder groups? Who is missing from the table you are creating?
- What data are available to you that help you understand the ecosystem and landscape? What is not available? Given that ways of gathering and analyzing data are important, how might you learn from those with lived experience without placing unnecessary burden?
- Which other funders and funding organizations are part of the ecosystem and landscape, past and present? And what are the education outcomes that other investments have aimed/aim to improve?

Check Your Assumptions

Assumptions shape beliefs, behaviors, and decisions. In education philanthropy, assumptions about learners, families, educators, communities, learning, achievement and the causes of educational inequities shape how problems are defined, solutions pursued and resources allocated.

Examining your assumptions involves reflecting on your values and beliefs – particularly before and during grant action - and considering how they shape your understanding of those with and for whom you work. Identifying and interrogating assumptions is a critical process for surfacing what you believe, why you believe it, and how those beliefs show up in your grantmaking practices, relationships and strategies.

Notably, checking your assumptions should not be reduced to a personal reflective exercise. Effective education grantmaking requires not only self-reflection but also a willingness to test assumptions against data, research and the lived experiences of learners, families, educators and communities. It also demands a belief that lived experience is valuable evidence.

This interrogation helps funders recognize when unexamined assumptions may reinforce deficit-based narratives, overlook community assets and expertise or limit understanding of the complex factors that influence learning opportunities and outcomes. By questioning assumptions early and often, funders can develop a more accurate understanding of educational challenges and opportunities and make more informed decisions about where and how to invest.

At the organizational level, this process helps clarify how education work aligns with the institution's broader mission, values and commitments. Because personal experiences, institutional power, professional roles and organizational culture all shape decision-making, regularly checking assumptions is essential to foster internal alignment, strengthen learning and ensure that grantmaking advances equitable and just educational outcomes.

Practices

- Be reflexive. Reflect on your educational and other lived experiences, and how they have shaped your positionality in the work.
- Have conversations within your team and across your organization that aim for honest and deep understanding of the motivations and assumptions that underlie your beliefs and behaviors.
- Discuss what you understand the purpose of education to be and how it aligns with or diverges from the priority areas your organization focuses on.
- Build in regular opportunities to test your strategy's underlying assumptions against emerging data and community feedback, and adjust course when the evidence doesn't support them.

Probing Questions

- What beliefs about learners, families, educators or communities are embedded in your grantmaking strategy, and how often are those beliefs tested against lived experience and evidence?
- What assumptions do you hold about what drives educational success, and how have those assumptions been shaped by your own experiences, education or position?
- How might you integrate the perspectives of learners, families, educators and nonprofit leaders with lived experience to challenge and test your assumptions?
- Whose knowledge, expertise and evidence do you trust most when making education funding decisions?
- How do your grantmaking processes encourage curiosity and learning? Do your processes privilege certainty and control?

Commit to Clarity and Transparency

The terms "equity" and "justice" are widely used in education philanthropy and can refer to a broad range of conditions, goals, processes and outcomes. Because these terms are often interpreted differently, they can lose clarity and precision unless organizations explicitly define their meanings.

Educational inequity may take many forms, including disparities in access to high-quality learning opportunities, experienced educators, rigorous coursework, supportive learning environments, resources, representation, belonging or educational attainment. Being clear about which challenges are being targeted helps funders develop more coherent strategies and stronger theories of change.

This principle encourages funders to "say what they mean" – to be specific about the educational inequities and injustices they seek to address and the outcomes they hope to achieve. Funders should also be explicit about the levers they use to advance equity and justice, whether through policy change, resource allocation, educator development, systems transformation, community leadership, learner supports or other approaches.

Clarifying whether efforts focus on individuals, institutions, systems or structures, or a combination of these – whether they are addressing root causes or symptoms – helps ensure strategies are appropriately matched to the problems they seek to address. For example, structural inequities in educational opportunity cannot be solved solely through interventions aimed at changes for individual learners, families or educators.

Precision in aim and language similarly help funders distinguish between the root causes of inequity and their manifestations, leading to more effective investments and more meaningful evaluation. Using shared language across teams reduces confusion and mixed messages, strengthens organizational alignment, supports more targeted learning and evaluation and creates greater accountability for advancing educational equity and justice.

Practices

- Clarify that education equity and justice is central to your organization's responsibility and purpose.
- Define equity and justice in your grantmaking context, in education and across the systems that sit adjacent to or intersect with it.
- Classify your foundation's altitude and attention as direct-service, structural, or systemic.
- Select the levers that can unlock or otherwise ease the work of moving from inequity to equity, injustice to justice.
- Develop shared language in your organization.

Probing Questions

- If you were barred from using the words "equity" and "justice," how would you define and describe your intent, efforts and goals? What do equity and justice specifically mean in the context of your education grantmaking?
- What educational conditions, opportunities or outcomes would indicate that equity or justice has improved?
- How are your definitions reflected in funding decisions, evaluation frameworks, communications and partnerships?
- Are your strategies aimed at changing individual behaviors, institutional practices, systems, structures or some combination of these? Related, are you addressing symptoms of inequity, root causes or both?
- How do you know that your definition of the problem reflects the experiences of those most affected?

Expand Your Analysis of Learner Success

As the saying goes, we measure what matters. In education, funders help shape what matters through the outcomes they prioritize, the evidence they value and the ways they define and evaluate success. The challenge before us is to examine our thinking about and approaches to measurement. This principle bridges values and accountability. It can help funders translate aspirations into concrete decisions about what they measure, reward, learn from and ultimately fund.

Definitions of learner success are too often narrowed to test scores, graduation rates and other lagging indicators that capture only a partial picture of growth, learning, access and opportunity. Expanding measurement and assessment to include factors such as belonging, engagement, identity development, critical thinking, well-being, cultural responsiveness, agency, and access to supportive learning and other life environments enables funders to develop a more complete understanding of what helps learners thrive. Because learning does not occur in isolation, broadening attention to the conditions and experiences that contribute to meaningful learning and development is crucial, including systems such as housing, food, climate, health and employment, which all contribute to learner success.

Funders should also consider how learners, families, educators and communities define learner success. Community-informed understandings of success can reveal priorities and outcomes that conventional accountability systems often overlook.

This principle is especially important for efforts focused on education equity and justice because traditional metrics frequently reflect and reinforce inequities rooted in race, place, income, language, disability, geography and other dimensions of identity and opportunity. When success is defined too narrowly, the strengths, experiences, assets and aspirations of historically marginalized learners can remain invisible in grantmaking decisions and policy discussions. Instead, access to and analysis of disaggregated data helps illuminate who is affected, how and why, revealing patterns that aggregate data can flatten or obscure.

Practices

- Expand what you measure and the indicators you rely on to understand change and success.
- Draw on disaggregated data to understand the nature of the problem your work looks to address.
- Ensure data privacy when disaggregating data.
- Resource organizations to build their internal capacity for data collection, analysis, evaluation and learning.
- When reviewing evaluation results, reinforce that the data will not be used punitively but rather to understand organizations' needs.
- Coordinate and streamline data collection among funders supporting the same organization to reduce duplicative reporting.

Probing Questions

- How does your foundation define learner success, and who helped shape that definition?
- Which learner outputs or outcomes are difficult to measure but still matter?
- Which sectors or disciplines, outside of education, provide concepts or measurement practices that expand or otherwise inform your understanding of learner success?
- Which learners become more visible when data are disaggregated? Which inequities become more visible?
- How are you assessing the learning environments and conditions that shape learner outcomes?
- What evidence would demonstrate that your grantmaking is advancing the specific form(s) of educational equity or justice you seek?

Figure Out Your Goals

This principle helps grantmakers anchor which goals matter in education equity and justice, and how funders' goal setting directly shapes student learning conditions, opportunity structures and system behavior. Rather than act toward generalized aspirations, this principle encourages education grantmakers to articulate the specific educational conditions, opportunities and learner outcomes they aim to improve or transform.

Funders are encouraged to lead with abundance—emphasizing strengths, assets and possibilities within learners, families, educators and communities—while also actively seeking to repair past and present harms in education systems, including those rooted in segregation, exclusionary discipline, inequitable funding, language suppression, disability exclusion and other structural inequities.

Incorporating input from learners, families, educators, school leaders and communities most affected by educational inequities is central to this principle, grounded in the recognition that funders do not hold all relevant knowledge. These perspectives help ensure that goals reflect lived realities and educational aspirations, not only institutional priorities.

Testing goals for unintended consequences before action is taken helps reduce risk and prevent harm. In education, this includes assessing whether goals might unintentionally reinforce achievement gaps, narrow curriculum and instruction, increase burdens on educational organizations and institutions, or shift responsibility for systemic inequities onto individuals.

Clear goals translate values into strategy, connect understanding of education systems with concrete action and enable sustained follow-through over time. When paired with a clear understanding of leverage points, funders can focus resources where they are most likely to drive meaningful and equitable change. Critically, adaptability is essential. External conditions such as shifts in education policy, funding environments, public health crises, demographic changes and economic instability can significantly affect learners, educators and education systems, requiring funders to adjust strategies while remaining grounded in clear equity-oriented goals.

Practices

- Clarify where the targeted change is located (i.e., individual change or population change).
- Pressure-test your intended goals with those most impacted by the problems you're seeking to address as well as peers and practitioners whose work would be affected.
- Frame goals around the strengths and assets of learners, communities, education leaders and institutions, while explicitly naming the harms you aim to repair.
- Explore whether your goals could produce unintended consequences before you finalize your strategy.
- Revisit your goals periodically in light of shifting external conditions (e.g., policy changes, funding environments and demographic shifts) and be willing to adjust your strategy while staying grounded in your equity and justice commitments.

Probing Questions

- What specific educational conditions, opportunities or learner outcomes are you trying to improve? How do your goals address historical and structural inequities in education systems?
- What assumptions about how education systems change are embedded in your goals?
- Do your goals shift responsibility for problems rooted in systems and structures onto learners or educators?
- How do shifts in education policy, funding or demographics affect your strategy? What external changes would require you to revise or abandon your goals?

Form a Multidimensional View of Change

Educational opportunities and outcomes are shaped by the interaction of multiple systems, structures, relationships, beliefs and experiences. As a result, educational inequities rarely arise from a single cause and cannot be addressed through isolated interventions alone. This principle encourages funders to make explicit the multidimensional nature of educational change and to understand how progress occurs across interconnected levels of the education ecosystem.

Educational change may involve shifts in policy, funding, governance, teaching and learning, school climate, educator capacity, family and community engagement, learner experiences and broader social and economic conditions. These dimensions influence one another in ways that can either reinforce or reduce inequities. Funders who take a multidimensional view are better positioned to identify root causes, understand system dynamics and align strategies with the complexity of the challenges they seek to address.

Philanthropy is rightfully critiqued for its fragmented, siloed nature and strategic approaches that misalign problems with solutions. Individual-level interventions are unable to address structural-level problems, though it's more common in funding approaches. This principle anchors a careful analysis of the alignment among grant initiatives, funded programs and broader system goals.

Taking a multidimensional view requires intentionally connecting work across issue areas, strategies and levels of action. By making interdependencies visible and acting on them deliberately and at the appropriate level of intervention, funders can create more coherent approaches to advancing educational equity and justice and increase the likelihood of meaningful and sustained change.

Practices

- Map how strategies, portfolios and funding decisions interact across the foundation, so interdependencies are visible and intentional.
- Build regular cross-program, cross-portfolio learning and decision-making routines that help staff identify overlap, gaps and opportunities for aligned action.
- Identify where work in one area of your organization or team's portfolio affects another, drawing out connections across childcare, PK-20, youth development, workforce pathways, etc.
- For multi-issue philanthropies, examine outcomes in each area that intersect with or may influence education outcomes for learners.
- Identify changes in other sectors and systems that affect educational change in the areas you're working in, including housing, employment, health and others.

Probing Questions

- How might the internal organization of your foundation staff and areas of giving contribute to or intentionally break down sectoral siloes?
- What opportunities and solutions might be uncovered by convening cross-sector partners, systems and funders to share insights and learnings?
- Are the interventions you fund matched to the level of the problem — do individual-level programs get asked to solve structural or system-level issues?
- How well do your grant initiatives and funded programs align with the broader system-level goals you're trying to advance? Where might there be a mismatch?
- Which dimensions of the education ecosystem are you currently addressing, and which are you leaving out? How might that gap limit your impact?

Affirm Your Goals in Broader Organizational Practice and Grant Operations

This principle helps move from developing equity and justice goals of your grants program to centering them in how the philanthropic organization actually operates. Advancing educational equity and justice requires grantmakers not only to articulate equity and justice goals, but to actively develop, refine and continually affirm them through institutional practice, not just program strategy.

Organizational practice and grant operations provide critical context that can condition grant strategy, decision-making, deployment, engagement and monitoring. This context includes, but is not limited to:

- Governance: The roles of boards, trustees and leadership in setting expectations and holding the organization accountable for equity and justice commitments.

- Grant evaluation: Whether the metrics and methods used to assess grantee success reflect equity-oriented values or default to narrow, deficit-based measures.

- Vertical relationships: How equity and justice goals are communicated, interpreted and acted on across levels of the organization, from trustees to program staff to grants administration.

- Staffing: Recruitment, professional development, and whether staff at every level, not only program officers, hold the knowledge and relationships needed to advance this work.

- Contractors and vendors: Whether the consultants, evaluators and service providers an organization engages are held to the same equity commitments expected of grantees.

In practice, affirming equity and justice goals means examining whether internal processes and decisions reinforce or undermine education equity and justice goals over time — and recognizing that even well-articulated program goals can be quietly undone by governance structures, evaluation methods, staffing gaps or outside partners who are sometimes not engaged with the same standards.

Practices

- Design and conduct evaluations and assessments or organizational practice in partnership with funded organizations for the purpose of learning and improvement, not sorting, ranking or reviewing foundation staff.
- Assess whether all grants staff, not just program staff, possess the knowledge, skills and relationships needed to support education equity and justice work.
- Build equity and justice expectations into board and trustee orientation, ongoing governance training and decision-making protocols - not just program-level strategy documents.
- Review recruitment, hiring and professional development practices for grants administrators to ensure they build capacity for equity-centered work, not just technical capability.
- Treat vendors, consultants and contracted partners as extensions of your grantmaking — hold them to the same equity commitments you expect from grantees.

Probing Questions

- Where in your processes can equity goals be overridden or diluted, and who has the influence to do so?
- In their unique roles, what do trustees need to know and do to advance educational equity and justice, and how do they receive and engage that information?
- Do all grant staff, not only program staff, have the knowledge, skills and relationships needed for this work? Where are the gaps?
- Do the contractors, consultants and vendors your organization engages reflect and reinforce your equity commitments, or operate outside them?

Mobilize All Resources at Your Disposal

Funders must use every tool at their disposal to effect change. Direct grants, as well as those made through donor collaboratives, donor-advised funds, program-related investments and other capital forms and structures should be marshaled. Beyond grants, the full range of capitals (e.g., social, reputational, human, intellectual and moral) should be mobilized. Advancing education equity and justice requires funders to use the full range of tools at their disposal to improve educational opportunity, learning conditions and outcomes for learners—particularly those most impacted by systemic inequities.

Financial tools can support improvements in areas such as access to high-quality instruction, educator development and retention, school infrastructure and student support systems. Social capital can strengthen relationships across schools, districts, community organizations and policymakers, and engage policy and governance reform. Reputational capital can help shape narratives, storytelling and public messaging about learners, education institutions and communities in ways that counter deficit-based framing. Human capital can support leadership development, technical assistance and capacity-building within education systems.

This principle reinforces shared responsibility among staff, trustees and donors for improving educational systems and outcomes. It also clarifies accountability within the organization for aligning all available tools with equity and justice goals.

When fully aligned, the integration of multiple forms of capital and influence increases the likelihood of meaningful and sustained improvements in educational opportunity, learning environments and student success.

Practices

- Map your own sphere of influence — your relationships, expertise, platform and position — and ask what you could offer beyond a grant check.
- Seek out donor collaboratives and co-funding partnerships that let you pool capital, share risk and move resources at a scale no single funder could reach alone.
- Create a culture of accountability. Name who — staff, trustees, donors — owns which forms of capital and hold each other accountable for deploying them.
- Use your organization's platform and credibility to shift public narratives about learners, schools and communities — countering deficit-based framing rather than reinforcing it.
- Invest your staff's time and expertise directly in the field — through leadership coaching, technical assistance or capacity-building — not just through grant dollars.

Probing Questions

- How are different forms of capital (financial, social, reputational, human) intentionally aligned to improve educational opportunity?
- Where are you using only grants when other tools could better address systemic educational barriers?
- Do your combined tools match the level of the educational problem you are trying to solve?
- What evidence shows that your influence is improving conditions for learners, not just organizational visibility or alignment?
- What does it look like to be "fully engaged" without becoming overly directive in education systems?
- Where are there tensions between different tools or strategies, and how are those resolved?

Reflect Deeply and Deliberately

Clarity alone is insufficient for effective grantmaking for education equity and justice; it requires continuous reflection, learning and adaptation. This principle reminds education grantmakers to cultivate the knowledge, skills, abilities, mindsets and relational capacities needed to advance educational equity and justice through deep, deliberate reflection that builds self- and situational awareness.

Improving educational opportunities and outcomes requires more than technical capability. Reflection helps grantmakers recognize their strengths and gaps in knowledge or perspective so they can better understand how their decisions and behaviors influence educational change efforts. It also helps engender a deep understanding of learners, communities, educational systems, historical and contemporary inequities, and the complex factors that shape teaching, learning and leadership.

Reflection is both an individual and collective endeavor that broadens perspective. Meaningful reflection should extend beyond foundation staff and trustees to include learners, families, educators, school leaders, nonprofit partners, policymakers, researchers and community members whose experiences can provide proximate knowledge about how strategies are experienced and whether intended outcomes are being achieved. These perspectives often surface overlooked yet important feedback and lessons that may not otherwise be revealed.

Reflective practice strengthens implementation, supports continuous improvement and reinforces learning as a discipline. By regularly and intentionally examining what is working, what is not, and why funders can adapt their approaches, deepen accountability to the communities they seek to serve and increase their effectiveness.

Practices

- Assess grant strategy, grantmaking process and practice and organizational policies to determine areas for improved alignment with equity and justice goals.
- Develop and maintain authentic, mutually respectful relationships with funded organizations and other education and philanthropy partners.
- Assess and invest in organizational capacity and capability for your work, including efforts to advance educational equity and justice through coaching, leadership development and similar experiences.
- Practice self-awareness and inner humility to recognize where power imbalances exist in relationships between funders and grantee partners.
- Listen to learners and system leaders, including those outside of your grantee circle.

Probing Questions

- What have you learned in the past year that has changed how you think about educational equity and justice?
- What knowledge, experiences or perspectives are missing from your understanding of the educational challenges you seek to address?
- How are lessons from successes and failures captured, discussed and incorporated into future grantmaking decisions?
- What evidence would lead you to change course?
- How do you share what you are learning—including mistakes—with partners and communities?

Persist in the Long Arc of Change

Change in education takes time. Research and practice consistently show that meaningful improvements in educational systems—such as strengthening instructional quality, expanding access to rigorous learning opportunities, improving school climate and addressing inequities in resources and outcomes—often unfold over years rather than within typical funding cycles. As a result, sustained commitment is essential, particularly when addressing inequities rooted in long-standing historical and structural barriers.

This principle offers funders a foundational premise in philanthropic strategy – the commitment to staying the course over time, wherever it may change or lead, shapes your grantmaking in quite practical ways. Persistence in this context means maintaining focus on long-term educational equity and justice goals while adapting strategies as conditions, evidence and community needs change. Learning, reflection and adaptation should be ongoing.

This principle also encourages education funders to provide funding that allows partners to be both responsive and opportunistic to produce systems change. This takes time.

Persistence in education grantmaking is not about rigidity or maintaining strategies regardless of evidence. Rather, it is the sustained commitment to educational equity and justice goals combined with the willingness to correct or refine approaches over time. It means staying the course even when you hit pitfalls or face stumbling blocks. When aligned in this way, persistence helps turn vision into long-term action and supports stronger, more resilient partnerships that improve opportunities and outcomes for learners.

Practices

- Commit to a long time horizon – 5-10 year, at minimum. Research finds that education reform is generational change. There is no silver bullet in education.
- Distinguish between staying committed to goals and becoming rigid in approach.
- Ensure that long-term strategies remain responsive to evolving needs and changing contexts.
- Regularly assess signals that tell you that persistence is leading to progress versus stagnation.
- Use exit strategies that ensure grantee partners receive multi-year runways or tie-off grants, rather than sudden funding cliffs.
- Recognize and record missteps, mishaps and mistakes. Recognize and record lessons learned. Keep at it.

Probing Questions

- What field infrastructure can your funding strengthen, including support for intermediaries and backbone organizations, field research and evaluation, policy work, field convenings, leadership development and nonprofit staff wellness, and narrative change?
- What factors determine your funding timeline? Are they organization-driven or tied to the context and conditions in which you're operating?
- If your funding cycle is short, how do your aims advance change that requires funding and other philanthropic support over a longer time horizon?
- What pressures (political, financial, institutional) might make it difficult to sustain support for this work?
- Which other funders or funder groups might you approach to explore partnerships, aligned and pooled funding to ensure sustained financial resources when your organization may no longer be able to provide them?

A FINAL WORD

The "Principles of Grantmaking for Education Equity and Justice" is being written and published at a time of consequential political, social and economic re-engineering through federal and state policy, constitutional reform and political action. In recent years, the project of education has comprised acts to reform, repair, re-assess and reimagine education. While any single act does not define a broad education agenda, arguably, this is a period in our living history when the very nature of how we learn, teach, work, lead and live is being tested, defended, changed and remade.

Throughout this report, we champion bold yet tangible ideals that can animate a sector steadfast in its commitments to ensuring all learners have the resources they need to pursue and lead opportunity-rich lives. By emphasizing universal goals, we do not intend to signal political neutrality or ignore today's headwinds, which remain strong and severe across legislative, social, cultural and economic environments. Indeed, historical harms still requiring repair are being compounded by fresh systemic trauma inflicted upon learners of all ages and the educators and administrators who guide them. Education and learning have long been contested terrain, and this moment is no different. As always, a durable commitment to education as a vibrant public good and doorway to opportunity and agency is imperative.

Principled leadership in education philanthropy is not for a single moment, rather it is a mandate over generations. The time to act is now. The time to act is always.

Resources

Stay ahead of the curve in education philanthropy! Explore curated reports, deep research, and case studies on Grantmakers for Education's resource hub.

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