



grantmakers^{for}education 

THE BIG VISION for the NEXT STAGE of Education Philanthropy



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Introduction

What will the future hold for education philanthropy?

This year marked an unexpected turning point in the way Americans learn and the way they will learn in the future:

- A once-in-a-century global pandemic has stopped in-person instruction for most students, creating an urgency for defining the ground rules for successful remote instruction while exacerbating long-standing educational disparities.
- A national racial reckoning has brought irrefutable demands for an end to the way institutions in this country, including those in education, systematically disadvantage communities of color—especially Black and Indigenous Americans.
- An unprecedented economic crisis has highlighted the underappreciated role of schools in providing essential food security and wraparound services for struggling families.
- A newly elected presidential administration will likely upend the national education priorities of the past four years and offer renewed opportunities for partnership with state and local education leaders.

The potential for philanthropy to help shape the future of the American system of education has never been greater. Change is happening. But there is no guarantee that this change will result in improved and equitable educational outcomes for learners. Education funders must determine from an array of opportunities and needs where to focus their resources to leverage the change they hope to see in how our nation's education system functions and serves learners going forward.

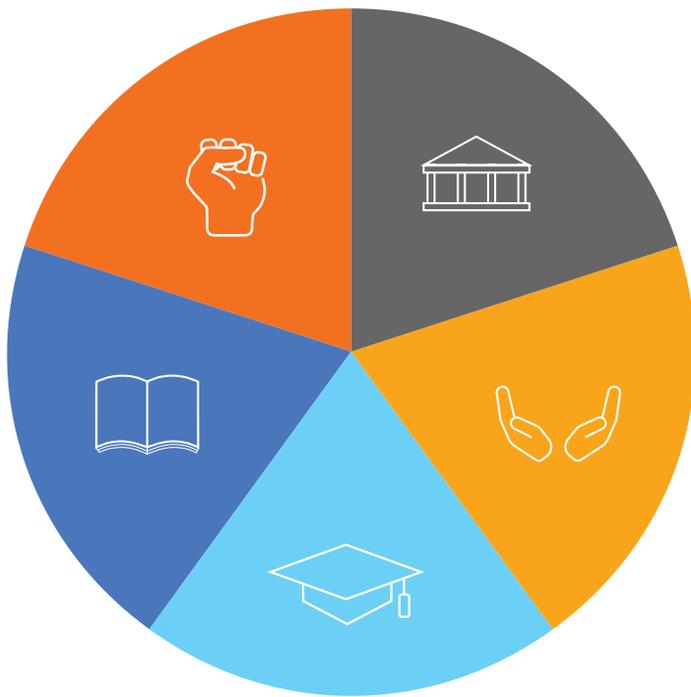
Where could funders make a difference now?

Grantmakers for Education (GFE) surveyed our members and others supporting education philanthropy to understand where they as *individuals* see the greatest opportunities for leveraging action in this quickly evolving reality. Our focus on capturing individual perspectives reflects our view that individual voice is a *leading* indicator of how institutional priorities and strategies may evolve. Reflecting back the outlook of individuals is especially critical during a time of rapid societal transformation.

Benefiting from the insights of a set of member advisors, we identified issues highly relevant to the current moment to home in on five interlocking themes we believe are central to the future of education:

- Pre-K-12 Educational Improvement
- Racial Justice in Education
- Civic Education and Students
- Postsecondary and Workforce Success
- Philanthropy in an Inequitable System

Major Themes for the Future of Education

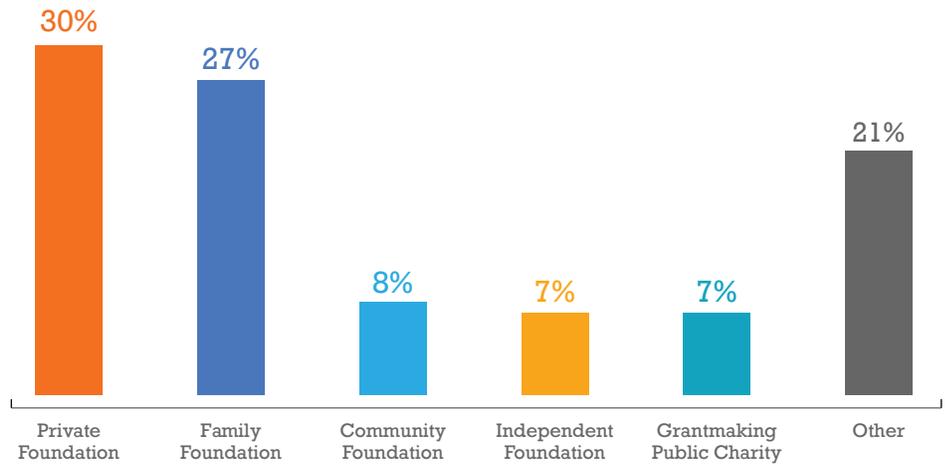


Within these major themes, we identified a subset of **41 specific priority areas** that could be rated on three criteria critical for assessing where education funders see the greatest potential for catalyzing change. (See “Thematic Priority Areas” for a complete listing of the 41 priority areas within each of the five major thematic areas.) These criteria include:

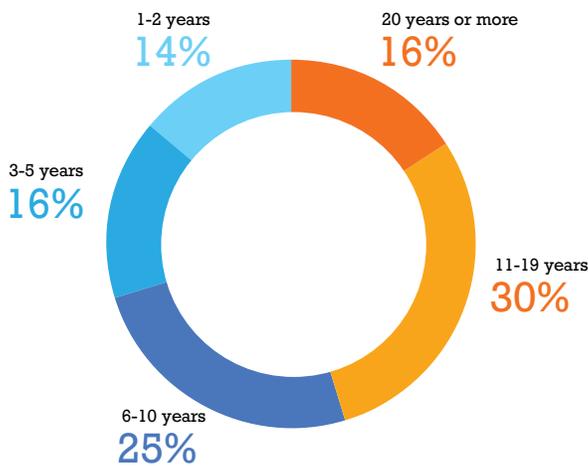
- **Urgency**—Has addressing the priority area become more or less urgent in the current environment?
- **Opportunity**—Is there an opportunity for systemic change in the priority area given the current environment?
- **Philanthropy**—Is philanthropy an essential part of accelerating systemic change in the priority area?

All GFE members, as well as others involved in education philanthropy, had the opportunity to respond. A total of 101 individuals shared their perspectives in the September 2020 survey. These respondents represent a broad cross-section of philanthropy. They hail from a wide array of philanthropic institutions, with the largest shares of respondents being affiliated with private and family foundations. Close to half of respondents have worked in philanthropy for more than 10 years, while the other half are newer to the sector. Respondents also reflect a fairly even balance between those with a national or multi-regional focus and those with a single-region or local focus.

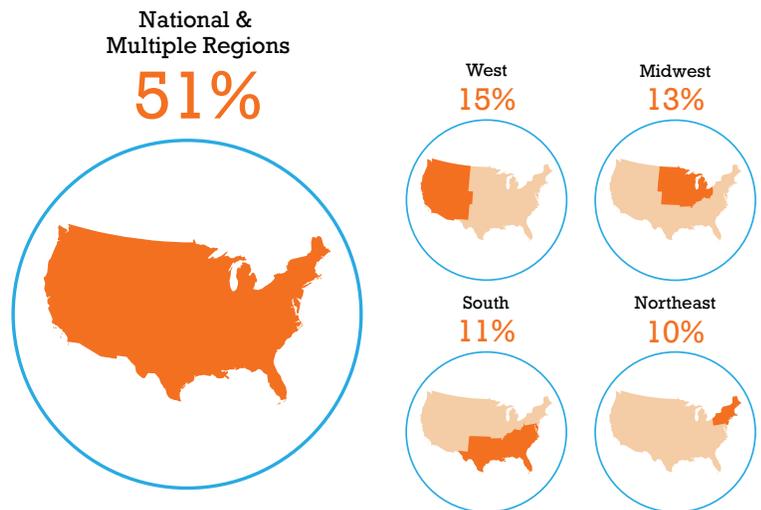
Which of the following organization types best describes your grantmaking organization?



How long have you worked in the field of philanthropy?



In which region(s) does your organization fund?



What did we learn?

Opportunities abound for education funders to engage around priorities that will shape the future of education in this country. From addressing resource inequities in public schools to improving remote learning at all levels to increasing engagement in public policy and advocacy, respondents to our survey identified what they perceive to be the most critical priorities for enhancing learning and advancing equity in education. They also pointed out several potential areas of caution.

To help education funders navigate these learnings and plan for the next stage of education philanthropy, we begin with “The Big Picture.” In this section, we document a range of factors, priorities, and strategies for education funders to keep in mind in this changing environment, regardless of their specific funding priorities. This is followed by “The Path to Action,” where we further highlight areas of possible engagement, and caution, for education funders to consider in this new era.

Thematic Priority Areas

The Future of Pre-K-12 Educational Improvement

- Birth-to-five care
- Social-emotional and trauma informed supports for students
- Improving remote learning, including broadband and device access and teacher training
- Redefining success and accountability in K-12 schooling
- School choice
- Academic and curricular improvements (i.e., literacy and STEM instruction)
- Out-of-school time and enrichment programming
- Teacher quality
- Systemic alignment across K-12 education, early childhood care, and other social systems (i.e., health, housing, foster care, etc.)

The Future of Racial Justice in Education

- Replacing suspensions with alternative disciplinary programs
- Diversifying the educator workforce and school boards
- Addressing resource inequities in school budgeting
- Cultural awareness and implicit bias training for educators
- Providing trauma-informed guidance counselors
- Culturally inclusive curriculum
- Renewed school desegregation efforts
- Eliminating police presence in schools

The Future of Civic Education and Students

- Student voice in school and education policy
- Parent and community engagement in school and education policy
- Protecting immigrant and undocumented student rights
- Expanded civics education, both in and out of school
- U.S. History and social studies curriculum revisions to better include historically marginalized voices
- Social justice movement building beyond education (e.g., Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ rights)

The Future of Postsecondary and Workforce Success

- Postsecondary access for historically marginalized students
- Student transitions between high school and postsecondary
- Education access (including postsecondary) for incarcerated individuals
- Reforming the business model for colleges and universities
- College affordability and improving the financial aid process
- Addressing student debt
- Improvements to online and hybrid learning
- Meeting the basic needs of low-income college students (e.g., food, housing insecurity)
- Supporting postsecondary completion and reducing time-to-degree for historically marginalized students
- Supporting workforce development and career technical education programs
- Contributing to strong labor markets for completers of postsecondary education

The Future of Philanthropy in an Inequitable System

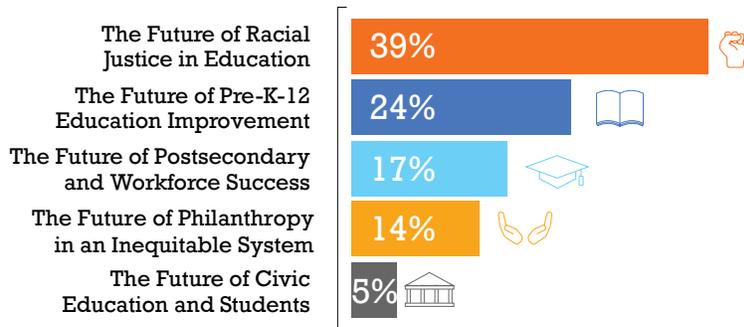
- Supporting major tax reforms aimed at addressing income and wealth inequality
- Supporting reparations for communities that have been exploited historically
- Supporting policy and advocacy efforts aimed at increasing government funding for social systems (i.e., education, health care)
- Funding historically marginalized communities with less structured grantmaking
- Greater accountability and transparency in philanthropy
- Shifting foundation strategy to include or expand explicit goals around racial or social justice
- Temporary expansion of budget for giving to address the current crisis

The Big Picture

Racial justice in education tops priorities.

When asked to select the overarching thematic area they believe is most important for education funders to focus on over the next one to three years, the single largest share of respondents (39%) chose racial justice in education. This finding most certainly reflects the national racial reckoning taking place, as well as the growing prioritization across the philanthropic sector in recent years of efforts to advance equity—and particularly racial equity.

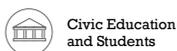
Which thematic area is most important for education funders to focus on over the next 1-3 years?



When separately asked to select the specific priority area they believe is most important for education funders to focus on over the next one to three years, respondents placed an issue central to achieving racial justice at the top of the list—specifically, addressing resource inequities in school budgeting. This ranking undoubtedly reflects in part the fact that school districts predominately serving students of color receive **\$23 billion less** than districts predominately serving white students, despite supporting the same number of learners. The racial justice-related priority areas of diversifying the educator workforce and school boards and supporting postsecondary completion for historically marginalized students also ranked among the top five.

What priority area would be most important for education funders to consider addressing over the next 1-3 years?

-  **Addressing resource inequities in school budgeting**
-  **Social-emotional and trauma informed supports for students**
-  **Improving remote learning, including broadband and device access and teacher training**
-  **Diversifying the educator workforce and school boards**
-  **Supporting postsecondary completion and reducing time-to-degree for historically marginalized students**



Civic Education and Students



Philanthropy in an Inequitable System



Postsecondary and Workforce Success



Pre-K-12 Educational Improvement



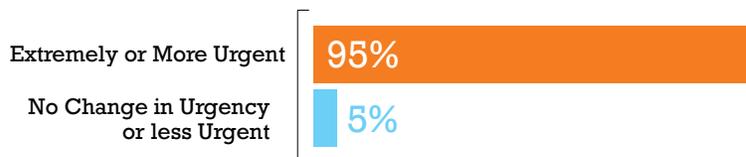
Racial Justice in Education

Finally, the two other priority areas that respondents identified as being most important for funders to address over the next one to three years—social-emotional and trauma-informed supports for students and improving remote learning and access—had already grown as priorities for education philanthropy in recent years. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further elevated the importance of addressing these priorities.

Everything feels more urgent now.

For education funders feeling more stressed about their work, they are not alone. Of the 41 priority areas included in our survey, a majority of respondents characterized all but two as being extremely urgent or more urgent in the current environment. Those identified as being most urgent include improving remote and hybrid learning and access from pre-K through postsecondary, addressing resource inequities in school budgeting, supporting policy and advocacy aimed at increasing government funding for social systems (i.e., education, health care), meeting the basic needs of low-income college students, and providing social-emotional and trauma-informed supports for pre-K-12 students.

Urgency Across Priority Areas



Opportunities for systemic change feel elusive in many areas of education.

While respondents consider most priority areas to be more urgent, they do not necessarily see the levers needed for deconstructing systems and making large-scale systems change. Overall, respondents identified only six of the 41 priority areas as having a strong opportunity for systemic change. This suggests that funders may be feeling challenged to find the right entry points, determine the best next steps, and identify the partners with whom they should they be working.

Which priority areas offer the strongest opportunities for systemic change?



Improving remote learning, including broadband and device access and teacher training



Shifting foundation strategy to include or expand explicit goals around racial or social justice



Social-emotional and trauma-informed supports for students



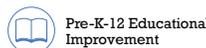
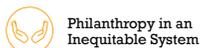
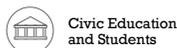
Improvements to online and hybrid learning



Social justice movement building beyond education



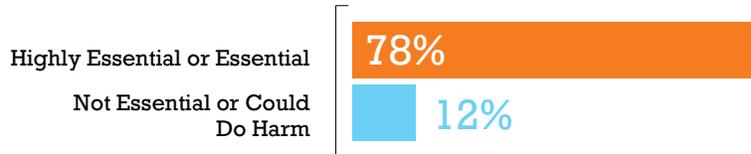
Cultural awareness and implicit bias training for educators



Philanthropy is needed more than ever.

Respondents see the philanthropic sector as having an essential role in accelerating systemic change for America's learners, regardless of whether opportunities for action are clearly defined at this moment. In more than three-quarters of the 41 priority areas, respondents believe education funders have a responsibility for catalyzing change. Among the areas where they see philanthropy as being most essential to advancing change are postsecondary access for historically marginalized students, meeting the basic needs of low-income college students, policy and advocacy aimed at increasing government funding for social systems, out-of-school time and enrichment programming, and social-emotional and trauma-informed supports for students.

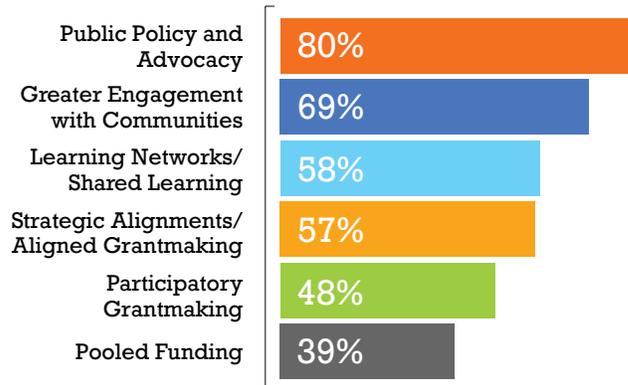
Role of Philanthropy Across Priority Areas



Policy and advocacy will be essential in the coming era.

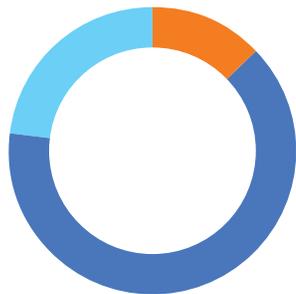
Four out of five respondents believe education funders must engage in supporting public policy and advocacy-related activities if they want to advance their priorities. This share far surpasses the just over half of institutional respondents that reported engaging in any public policy-related activities in the 2019 GFE benchmarking study. This finding suggests that the perspectives of individuals working in the philanthropic sector may be adapting more rapidly to the realities of the current environment than the practices of the institutions that employ them.

Which strategies are essential for advancing work in the priority areas you identified



At the same time, most respondents do not see the need for funders to focus on policy and advocacy exclusively. In fact, about two-thirds of respondents favor an approach that evenly balances programmatic and policy engagement. Although, another roughly one-quarter of respondents do, in fact, favor education funders taking a primary or exclusive policy and advocacy approach to achieving their vision.

To achieve the vision you have across education philanthropy, should the field focus more on programmatic strategies to support students and communities or policy and advocacy aimed at changing laws and regulations?



13% Primary or exclusive focus on programmatic strategies

64% Evenly balanced focus on programmatic strategies and policy and advocacy

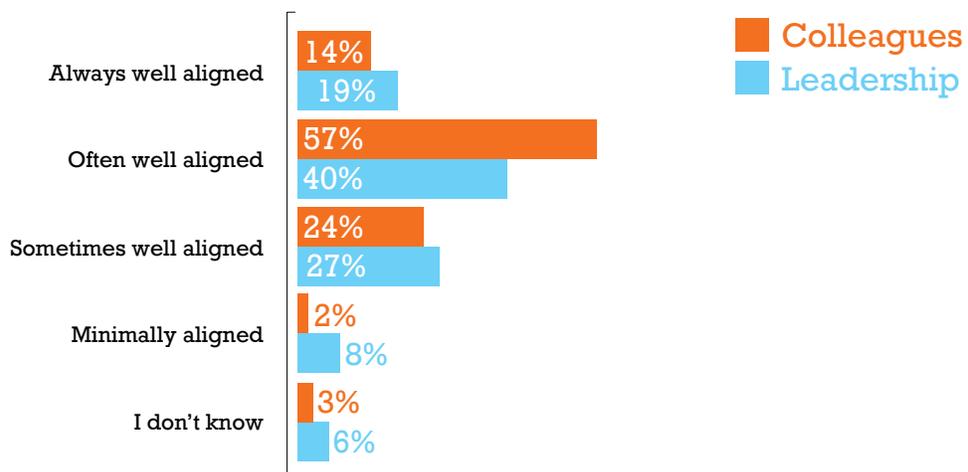
23% Primary or exclusive focus on policy and advocacy

Beyond policy, over two-thirds of respondents identified as essential the need for philanthropy to engage more closely with the communities they seek to benefit. This finding is consistent with broader trends across the field of philanthropy centered on adopting trust-based philanthropy and participatory grantmaking approaches and other strategies and tactics that let community power lead. In fact, almost half of respondents explicitly cited participatory grantmaking as being essential.

Vision alignment across foundation staff is generally solid.

More than two-thirds (71%) of respondents indicated a belief that their vision is often or always well aligned with colleagues in their organizations. Although, alignment between top leaders and staff has room to grow. When asked about alignment of their vision with top-decisionmakers in their organizations, including board members, respondents reported a notably lower share (59%). Nonetheless, well over half of respondents voiced alignment across the whole foundation.

How aligned is your vision for the next stage of education philanthropy to that of colleagues and top decision-makers (i.e., board, leadership) in your organization?



Interestingly, a modestly larger share of respondents indicated that their vision was “always” in alignment with leadership than colleagues (19% versus 14%). While survey findings will not allow for a more nuanced analysis, this finding may reflect in part the fact that staff are driving change in some institutions, while leadership is driving change in others.

The Path to Action

Education funders consider numerous factors when establishing their grantmaking priorities and strategies, from the interests of donors and boards to specific local or regional needs to opportunities for leveraging impact. By asking GFE members and others in the field to identify what they personally consider to be the most urgent priorities in education, the areas of greatest possible opportunity, and where philanthropy can have an essential role in supporting change, we are able to construct **four composite categories that help to illuminate areas of near-term and longer-term action for advancing the next stage of education philanthropy including:**

- The Trifecta
- The Opportunity Zone
- The Long Game
- The Stretch Goals

Many of the priority areas included in these composite categories overlap with areas highlighted in the preceding “Big Picture” findings. However, in this section we group them in ways that will ideally assist education funders in determining which of these priorities may fit best with their current priorities, funding strategies and tactics, and ideal time horizons for achieving results.

In addition, we have identified a handful of priority areas where respondents believe education funders may need to exercise caution, given the potential for limited success and unintended adverse consequences. These are presented in the category of:

- The Proceed-with-Cautions

The Trifecta

Strong urgency, opportunity and an essential role for philanthropy align to make the priorities identified as one of “The Trifecta” of critical importance for education funders to consider acting on now. Two of these priorities relate directly to remote and hybrid learning, indicating a need to address the topic from pre-K through postsecondary education. This reflects both the immediate needs of an in-person educational system upended by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as building on pre-crisis interest in how to maximize the potential for remote and hybrid instruction to increase educational access.

The Trifecta

↑ Urgency, ↑ Opportunity, ↑ Role for Philanthropy



Improving remote learning, including broadband and device access and teacher training



Social-emotional and trauma informed supports for students



Improvements to online and hybrid learning



Addressing resource inequities in school budgeting



Social justice movement building beyond education



Civic Education and Students



Philanthropy in an Inequitable System



Postsecondary and Workforce Success



Pre-K-12 Educational Improvement



Racial Justice in Education

Social-emotional and trauma-informed supports for students represents another priority area already benefiting from strong education funder interest that has become increasingly critical in this time. Students learning outside of schools are less able to access the social and emotional supports of educators and peers, while experiencing greater individual and family stress and potential exposure to family violence. Once in-person instruction begins again, learners will face the additional challenges of readjusting to more structured learning environments and overcoming learning shortfalls resulting from extended periods of remote instruction.

The two remaining priorities speak directly to the need for racial justice in education. As noted earlier, addressing resource inequities in school budgeting focuses on how schools serving primarily Black and brown learners are under-resourced compared to their white peers. For social justice movement building, the national racial reckoning has brought to the fore the fundamental need for the U.S. to remedy its long history of systemic anti-Black racism, along with all other forms of institutional oppression.

Next Steps: These are the issues most ripe for major collective action and funder leadership now.

The Opportunity Zone

In a context packed with so many urgent needs, it could be easy to miss where there may be opportunities for education funders to leverage important progress around specific priorities. Based on the survey responses, several priorities could be considered part of “The Opportunity Zone,” which combines mixed to low relative urgency with clear opportunity and entry points for pursuing change now. These are all issues where funders recognize that they have an essential role to play. Consider them a “second tier” to The Trifecta, where urgency is simmering (perhaps long-simmering) rather than on fire today. Among these priorities are two of long-time interest to education funders—supporting workforce development and career technical education programs and birth-to-five care.

The Opportunity Zone

↓ Urgency, ↑ Opportunity



Cultural awareness and implicit bias training for educators



Diversifying the educator workforce and school boards



Birth-to-five care



Supporting workforce development and career technical education programs



Replacing suspensions with alternative disciplinary programs



Civic Education and Students



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Pre-K-12 Educational Improvement



Racial Justice in Education

The remaining three priorities all fall under the racial justice theme. They include two topics that focus on educator development: cultural awareness and implicit bias training for educators and diversifying the educator workforce. In addition, respondents highlighted the explicit racial justice goal of replacing suspensions with alternative disciplinary programs as a specific strong opportunity for education funders to consider.

Next Steps: *These are the issues that warrant greater attention and collaboration now. Funders should work together to identify entry points created by the current moment and find ways to build momentum.*

The Long Game

One strength of philanthropy is its ability to maintain focus on important long-term priorities, despite the uncertainty of rapidly changing social and political environments. Among the priorities highlighted in “The Long Game” are ones that respondents identified as being no more urgent in the current moment but where philanthropy holds an essential role in catalyzing long-term change. In each case, the opportunity for systemic change appears modest. Three of these priorities fall within postsecondary education, with two explicitly focusing on the needs of historically marginalized students in accessing and completing their postsecondary educational experience. The remaining two priorities focus on Pre-K-12 educational improvement, highlighting the importance of investing in systemic alignment and out-of-school time and enrichment programming.

The Long Game

↓ Urgency, ↑ Role for Philanthropy



Postsecondary access for historically marginalized students



Systemic alignment across K-12 education, early childhood care, and other social systems



Out-of-school time and enrichment programming



Supporting postsecondary completion and reducing time-to-degree for historically marginalized students



Student transitions between high school and postsecondary



Civic Education and Students



Philanthropy in an Inequitable System



Postsecondary and Workforce Success



Pre-K-12 Educational Improvement



Racial Justice in Education

Next Steps: *These are issues in which funders should maintain steady commitment and track improvement over time.*

The Stretch Goals

It can be frustrating to identify priorities that are clearly urgent but where there are no clear entry points for leveraging action in the current moment. “The Stretch Goals” feature exactly these challenging areas of need. In fact, three of the priorities identified would require engagement at the national level (and, possibly, state level) to effect any real change in the current reality. These include advancing tax reforms to address income and wealth inequality, encouraging increased government funding for social systems and protecting immigrant and undocumented student rights.

The Stretch Goals

↑ Urgency, ↓ Opportunity



Meeting the basic needs of low-income college students



Supporting major tax reforms aimed at addressing income and wealth inequality



Supporting policy and advocacy efforts aimed at increasing government funding for social systems



College affordability and improving the financial aid process



Protecting immigrant and undocumented student rights



Civic Education and Students



Philanthropy in an Inequitable System



Postsecondary and Workforce Success



Pre-K-12 Educational Improvement



Racial Justice in Education

By comparison, the other two priorities relate to college affordability and meeting the needs of low-income college students. These would seem to be more amenable to some type of collaborative funder intervention than would attempting to move national policy. However, few respondents believe there is strong opportunity for action at this point.

Next steps: *These are all systemic issues that demand a comprehensive policy and advocacy strategy to gain traction. Building an ongoing learning agenda among funders is a necessary building block toward impact.*

The Proceed-with-Cautions

There are a set of priority areas that are highly controversial in the funding community. On the topic of whether philanthropic support was essential to move an issue forward, the survey also included the possibility that philanthropy could do harm in attempting to advance an agenda. There are six issue areas we have highlighted. In each area more than 10% of respondents thought philanthropy risked playing a negative role. However, each of the six also had many respondents who saw the issue as urgent, and the role of philanthropy as being essential. We call this group the “Proceed-with-Cautions” because funders need to go deeper on why there are schisms on each topic and the evidence that exists to support different perspectives.

The Proceed-with-Cautions

↓ Opportunity, ↓ Role for Philanthropy



School choice



Redefining success and accountability in K-12 schooling



Renewed school desegregation efforts



Supporting reparations for communities that have been exploited historically



U.S. history and social studies curriculum revisions to better include historically marginalized voices



Teacher quality



Civic Education and Students



Philanthropy in an Inequitable System



Postsecondary and Workforce Success



Pre-K-12 Educational Improvement



Racial Justice in Education

Half of the “could do harm” list are comprised of topics that have been central to the education improvement agenda for more than a decade. They include school choice, redefining success and accountability in K-12 schooling, and teacher quality. Each of these are areas in which many funders invested heavily in the past, and a smaller subset continue to maintain strong commitments. Others have divested from these areas, disillusioned with varied aspects of how the reform vision translated into action in schools.

The topic of U.S. history and social studies revisions to include historically marginalized voices makes the list and spans the topics of both racial justice and K-12 reform.

Respondents also saw mixed opportunity for philanthropy to engage effectively in advancing change around several priorities that align with a more far-reaching racial justice agenda, including supporting renewed efforts for school desegregation and reparations for communities that have historically been exploited. It will be necessary to seek to understand why funders are hesitant to take on these big issues.

Next steps: These are issues that require deeper conversation and debate among funders with the support of experts and evidence.

Conclusion

A global pandemic, national racial reckoning, economic crisis and upcoming presidential transition are together thrusting the U.S. education system into an uncharted era. Changes in how and how well Americans learn over the next several years will continue to come rapidly. What form these changes ultimately take will depend in no small part on the extent to which education funders invest now in the priorities they care about—priorities that must take into account considerations of urgency, opportunity, and a potentially catalytic role for the philanthropic sector.

Responses to our survey suggest that education funders are fairly well aligned internally to pursue these priorities. While respondents were asked to provide their individual perspective, a large majority believe their vision for the next stage of education philanthropy is generally well-aligned with peers in their organizations. The share was lower when asked about alignment of their vision with top decisionmakers (i.e., boards and leadership) but nonetheless represented about three out of five respondents.

To support education funders in building toward the future they envision during this critical time, we at Grantmakers for Education will be exploring with members how to operationalize their priorities and move their agendas forward. We look forward to partnering with our members and others in the funding community to support the next stage of education philanthropy in achieving excellence, opportunity, equity and justice for our country's diverse learners.

Appendix

Thematic Priority Areas Ranked by Role of Philanthropy, Opportunity and Urgency

50% or more of respondents agree	
25-49% of respondents agree	
Less than 25% of respondents agree	

Priority Area	Philanthropy Highly Essential/Essential	Strong Opportunity	Extremely Urgent
Civic Education and Students			
Social justice movement building beyond education			
Protecting immigrant and undocumented student rights			
Parent and community engagement in school and education policy			
Expanded civics education, both in and out of school			
U.S. history and social studies curriculum revisions to better include historically marginalized voices			
Student voice in school and education policy			
Philanthropy in an Inequitable System			
Supporting policy and advocacy efforts aimed at increasing government funding for social systems			
Shifting foundation strategy to include or expand explicit goals around racial or social justice			
Funding historically marginalized communities with less structured grantmaking			
Temporary expansion of budget for giving to address the current crisis			
Supporting major tax reforms aimed at addressing income and wealth inequality			
Greater accountability and transparency in philanthropy			
Supporting reparations for communities that have been exploited historically			
Postsecondary and Workforce Success			
Improvements to online and hybrid learning			
Meeting the basic needs of low-income college students			
Supporting workforce development and career technical education programs			
Postsecondary access for historically marginalized students			

Supporting postsecondary completion and reducing time-to-degree for historically marginalized students	●	●	●
Student transitions between high school and postsecondary	●	●	●
College affordability and improving the financial aid process	●	●	●
Addressing student debt	●	●	●
Reforming the business model for colleges and universities	●	●	●
Education access (including postsecondary) for incarcerated individuals	●	●	●
Contributing to strong labor markets for completers of postsecondary education	●	●	●
Pre-K-12 Educational Improvement			
Improving remote learning, including broadband and device access and teacher training	●	●	●
Social-emotional and trauma-informed supports for students	●	●	●
Birth-to-five care	●	●	●
Systemic alignment across K-12 education, early childhood care, and other social systems	●	●	●
Out-of-school time and enrichment programming	●	●	●
Teacher quality	●	●	●
Redefining success and accountability in K-12 schooling	●	●	●
Academic and curricular improvements	●	●	●
School choice	●	●	●
Racial Justice in Education			
Addressing resource inequities in school budgeting	●	●	●
Cultural awareness and implicit bias training for educators	●	●	●
Diversifying the educator workforce and school boards	●	●	●
Replacing suspensions with alternative disciplinary programs	●	●	●
Providing trauma-informed guidance counselors	●	●	●
Culturally inclusive curriculum	●	●	●
Eliminating police presence in schools	●	●	●
Renewed school desegregation efforts	●	●	●



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Grantmakers for Education (GFE) is the nation's largest and most diverse network of education grantmakers dedicated to improving educational outcomes and increasing opportunities for all learners. For more information, visit www.edfunders.org.

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