



# COMMUNITY *as* STRATEGY

Lessons for Field-Building  
from Accelerate ED

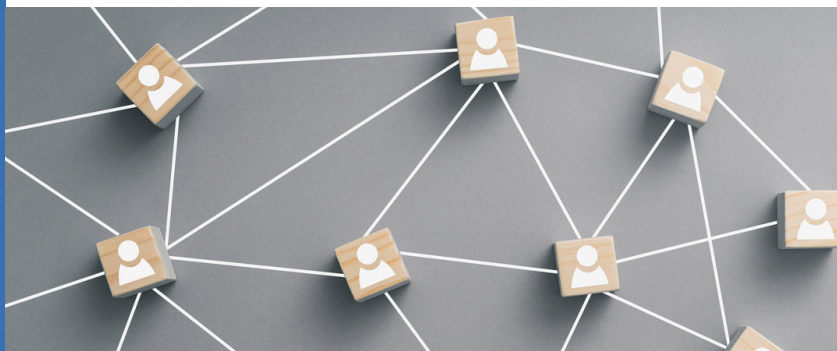
# What does it take to move a social impact field forward?

This piece sheds light on how to unite fragmented efforts into a movement of leaders across the country effectively tackling a complex problem, each in their home region or state. We tell this story through Accelerate ED, a community of 25+ regional sites from across the United States systematically building pathways that accelerate all students—especially those furthest from opportunity—to college degrees and meaningful careers. For the past four years, Education Strategy Group (ESG), with support of the Gates Foundation, has been entrusted with designing and nurturing Accelerate ED in ways that built a more inclusive field around the accelerated pathways movement, cultivated its leaders, distributed power to diverse actors, scaled effective policy and practice, and honored local context.

Philanthropy, policymakers and systems change leaders increasingly recognize the importance of field-building, defined by The Bridgespan Group as “activities and investments that unlock progress toward greater impact at scale.” We are sharing what we learned through our stewardship of Accelerate ED on ways to seed and shape a community that advances the difficult work of building a robust field—and how initial incubation efforts can lay the groundwork to spin an initiative out for larger field impact. This resource reflects on what design decisions led to the success of Accelerate ED and what we learned when we didn’t get it right. It offers implications for future field-building, and considerations for funders investing in community as a strategy for field-building.

Bridgespan identifies five observable characteristics of a field that indicate forward progress toward greater field impact. We reflect on the lessons we learned about each of these characteristics in supporting the Accelerate ED community:

1. **Field-level agenda:** Identify where to hold tight to clear guardrails and where to encourage variation and flexibility.
2. **Actors:** Distribute power among those closest to the problem and empower members to learn from one another’s strengths.
3. **Knowledge Base:** Recognize that public goods alone create limited change; communities need support to translate tools to their context.
4. **Infrastructure:** Build an inclusive field that honors the diversity of its members’ contexts, and design for belonging and contribution from the start.
5. **Resources:** Be clear about the stages of work and what supports make sense given where a site is focusing on their journey.

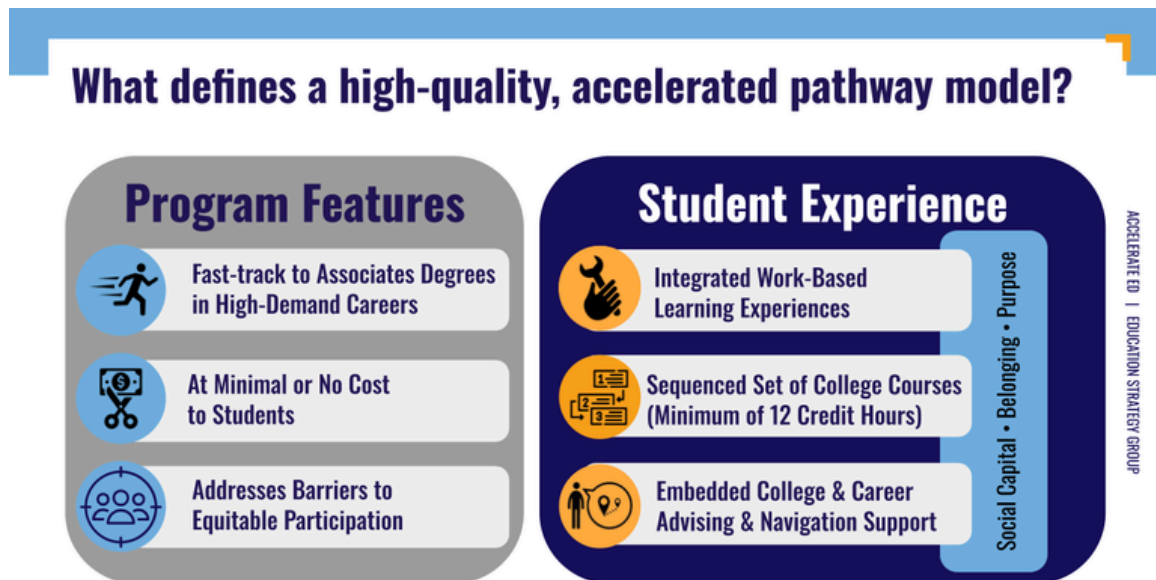


# The Need for a New Community to Build the Pathways Field

Accelerate ED brought together over 25 regions from across the country where K-12, higher education, industry, and community-based organizations are building and scaling accelerated pathways that tie together what students need most across multiple systems. These pathway models can look many ways depending on state and local context, but all incorporate career-connected dual enrollment sequences, work-based learning, and embedded advising. Critically, each regional team is anchored by an intermediary organization that coordinates the right partners, advances a unified vision and plan for scale, and presses for system change.

Accelerate ED evolved over three phases:

- In Phase 1, ESG coached 12 intermediaries and their partners through a Blueprint Design Sprint to create a roadmap for scale, established strong community connections, and created public goods
- In Phase 2, we coached a second cohort of 8 new intermediaries through the Blueprint and strengthened and expanded the community and set of public goods
- In Phase 3 we delivered responsive support to sites based on just-in-time needs, focused on broader field building activities, and led further co-creation of tools and public goods



Accelerate ED began as a Gates Foundation investment to catalyze the scale of strong education-to-career pathways work happening across the country. At the time, many initiatives and communities were already strengthening pathways for high school students through networks like Pathways to Prosperity, New Skills Ready Network, and Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship. Intensive school models like P-TECH were integrating early college,

industry partnership, and career-connected learning, but lacked the potential to reach every student in a community. The field needed a greater focus on acceleration to degrees and careers at **the scale of all students**. To get there, it was necessary to intentionally invest in varied types of teams—local, regional, and state-based—who were at different stages of their work yet all committed to scaling accelerated pathways in their context.

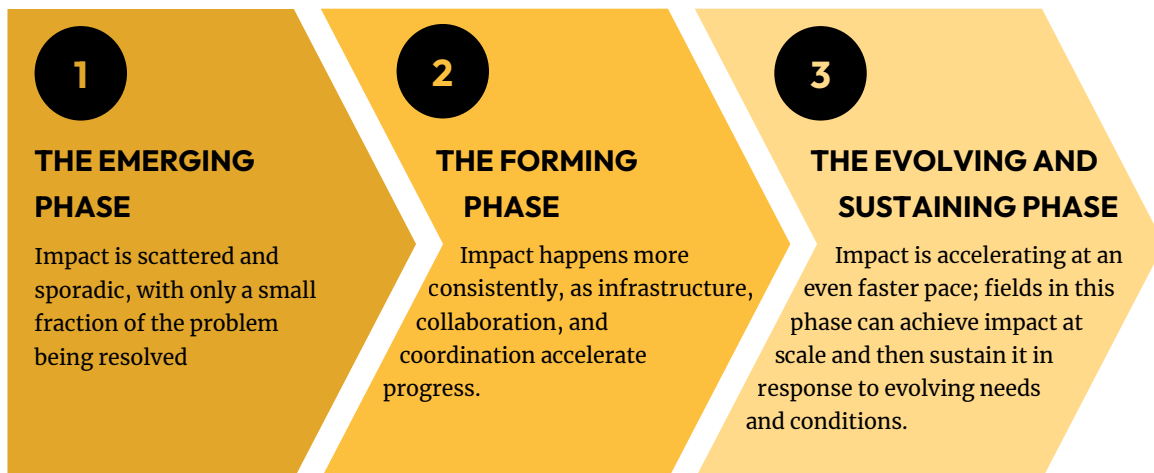
# When to Develop a Community as a Field-Building Strategy

Why invest in a community as a strategy to advance a scaling initiative? To build a strong movement, it is critical to invest in field-building. According to Bridgespan, field-building can be done through (1) strengthening the organizations in the field and/or (2) improving connections and collaboration. Bridgespan found that “field-building efforts are one of the most valuable investments funders can make, but historically such efforts are the least funded.” There are three phases on the path to field-level change: emerging, forming, and evolving/sustaining.

## WHAT ARE FIELD-BUILDING ACTIVITIES?

The Bridgespan Group defines a field as a set of individuals and organizations working to address a common social problem, often developing and using a common knowledge base. **Field-building** is the activities or investments that drive a field’s progress toward impact at scale.

*Source: [Field-building for Population Level Change: How Funders and Practitioners Can Increase the Odds of Success](#), The Bridgespan Group, 2020.*



Source: The Bridgespan Group

Maturation of the field derives from and is driven further by the following observable characteristics:

- **Field-level agenda:** Common goals and principles for the work, with enabling conditions to support it
- **Actors:** Diverse voices with shared identity and vision
- **Knowledge Base:** Data, tools, and information to design, implement, and adapt effective approaches
- **Infrastructure:** Connective tissue that enhances the efforts of actors by making them more coordinated, connected, and effective
- **Resources:** Distribution of financial capital through regranting entities that pool funds

ESG has used this framework to help think about the maturation of the accelerated pathways field through our work to launch and grow Accelerate ED. Building a strong community takes significant planning, capacity, and time to create clarity about the full learning arc, multiple ways to engage, and touchpoints for those at varying stages of development. Without it, change in select communities may have occurred, but the landscape in which pathways programs operate across the country may have remained the same.

To select the initial sites in 2022, the Gates Foundation ran a national call for proposals that prioritized intermediaries with demonstrated readiness to scale established accelerated pathways, focusing on organizations that could serve as anchor partners rather than starting from scratch.

The Foundation prioritized geographic and demographic diversity to learn about models across urban, suburban, and rural contexts with varying state policy environments; variability was a design choice. When ESG took on supporting the array of regional and state teams, which encompassed contexts as varied as New York City to Phoenix, Arizona to rural Appalachian Kentucky, we chose to establish Accelerate ED as a community, prioritizing relationship-building and peer learning. Embracing and addressing the needs resulting from this variability, and drawing on community expertise, was critical to designing meaningful and productive learning experiences. The community structure enabled practitioners across geographies and experience levels to learn from one another, sharing insights and emerging practices and questions that pushed collective thinking.

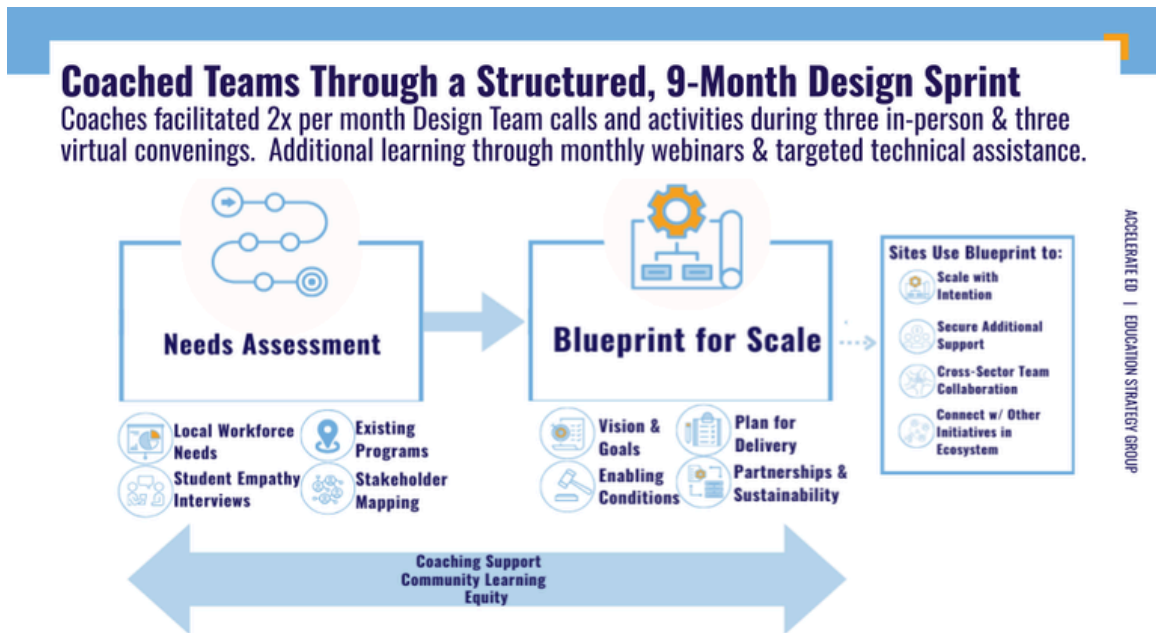
#### BRINGING NEW ENTRANTS INTO THE FIELD

Accelerate ED helped a range of organizational types grow into the role of pathways intermediary, creating momentum and expertise where it didn't exist previously and more permanent structures in the field. As an organization focused on teacher recruitment and training, Teach for America Appalachia was not the typical pathways intermediary organization. Yet, through a strong commitment to translating knowledge from Accelerate ED to the context of Appalachia, TFAA took on a much more expansive role leading regional partners to gain Perkins funding approvals for dual credit pathways, developing a near-peer advising model, and coordinating math pathways alignment.

ESG created a time-limited, nine-month Blueprint Design Sprint that helped sites assess their readiness to do the work and create a roadmap to scale. The Blueprints served as both a planning tool and communication vehicle for teams, capturing how communities planned to expand access to accelerated pathways, and identifying barriers to address, partners to engage, and ways to measure progress. We developed a Needs Assessment that was completed by a cross-sector team, to provide multiple vantage points of community assets and opportunities, and provided a Blueprint template for what communities should work toward, providing:

- **A structure to drive them towards collective decisions and a deliverable.** Creating regular cross-sector team meeting structures and coaching touchpoints drove the work forward through shared accountability.
- **A framework for coaching on specific components of pathways design** and resources necessary to scale, providing insights into what others have done previously.

- A **template that put goals and desired outcomes on paper**, and enabled teams to map out the steps and identify transformation needed to get to them.
- A **feedback process** where ESG and a select set of experts serving as critical friends crafted tailored memos to each team and created opportunities for teams to present to each other to strengthen their thinking.
- A **vehicle for external communications** to multiple audiences, including educators, industry partners, and funders.



All the sites in Phase 1 worked off the same core guiding principles, which were updated in Year 2 based on what we learned. In Phase 2, we differentiated support based on site readiness: we recruited eight sites to take part in a second cohorted Blueprint Design Sprint, provided deeper support to Phase 1 sites that were scaling programs, and built awareness in new communities.

In Phase 3, as we’ve strategized about what comes next for the pathways field and how best to position Accelerate ED for the future, we’ve turned our attention from intensive site

support to broader field-building activities, like lifting up proof points, developing public goods that make up a common knowledge base, articulating policy changes necessary to sustain the work, moving toward clear alignment on a prioritized set of data points, and bringing many more partners and funders to the table for awareness and support.

Expanded participation by additional partners and funders reflects the maturation of the field as it moves from the “emerging” to “forming” phase as described by Bridgespan.

STARTING POINT	CURRENT
Tight on the solution (programs that support Associate’s degree completion by the “13th year”)	More context-specific solutions aligned to a core set of principles (12+ postsecondary credits by HS graduation in a pathway aligned with local industry needs that includes advising and work-based learning)
Agnostic on the specific starting point / context of sites in the selection process	Clear set of criteria for what needs to be in place—both infrastructure and policy—before real work can start.
Closed community to selected grantee sites	Semi-closed community with structured opportunities for new sites to learn from those further along and different levels of engagement based on site readiness and needs
Loose on measurement criteria, with suggestions for the types of data to be collected, but no requirement	Movement toward a measurement framework with an expectation of reporting on common indicators
Storytelling focused on “why” accelerated pathways should be scaled	Public goods on why and “how” to actually develop and implement the pathways at scale, with clear proof points to highlight
Funding and coaching to 12 sites for planning from Gates Foundation alone	Funding for implementation of the plans in a subset of selected sites from a mixture of funders (including Gates)

As of Spring 2026, Accelerate ED is evolving into the Pathways Impact Collaborative, a national network led by the [Pathways Impact Fund at StriveTogether](#). The Collaborative is a continuation and evolution of Accelerate ED’s work to expand high-quality accelerated pathways for high school students and represents a critical momentum point for the field. What started as an initiative of a single

funder has morphed into a movement. To get to the “Evolving and Sustaining Phase,” and continue expanding the scale of impact, it was necessary for ESG and the Gates Foundation to spin off Accelerate ED. As we guide Accelerate ED into its next phase, we’re reflecting on what we’ve learned about impactful field-building, and how to position initiatives for long-term success.

# Lessons for Designing a Community that Drives a Movement

The Bridgespan field-building framework identifies five observable characteristics of field maturation: field-level agenda, actors, knowledge base, infrastructure, and resources. Here, we offer lessons from Accelerate ED that offer broader guidance to how funders and leaders can drive the field along each of these dimensions.

## 1. Field-level agenda: Identify where to hold tight to clear guardrails and where to encourage variation and flexibility.

In a workshop she held with Accelerate ED sites, Becky Margiotta of the [Billions Institute](#) asked sites to reflect on what makes up the “turkey sandwich” of their work, identifying what solution they hoped to scale in additional classrooms, schools, and districts. What part of their solution comprises the essentials (turkey and bread) and which parts are adaptable (condiments and toppings)? What aspects, if taken away, would make the solution unrecognizable or unresponsive to the critical pieces of the problem?

For accelerated pathways, the essential elements were the core, evidence-based components of accelerated course sequences, work-based learning, and advising and navigation. The community was powerful because of the many types of school models, paths to scale, and regional contexts that could incorporate these components. And there were times when we - as the convenors of the community - needed to adapt from being too prescriptive about what the sandwich looked like or what kind of bread it had.

Based on stakeholder feedback and implementation challenges, we shifted from positioning associate degree completion in Year 13 as the primary goal to emphasizing integration of dual enrollment, work-based learning, and career advising throughout grades 9-12. [Evidence from the field](#) was

suggesting that 12 dual enrollment credits is a significant momentum point, and Year 13 became an optional pathway to completion, with some communities focused on 12 credit hours as a more scalable solution to reach a broader pool of students.

As Accelerate ED evolved, it became clear that we needed to put a much stronger emphasis on supporting an integrated experience. Many regional intermediaries had successfully pushed hard on building out the pathway element within their wheelhouse of organizational expertise (dual enrollment, career-connected learning, advising) and the next mountain to climb was enabling every student to get an integrated experience with all three components.

We encouraged communities to likewise identify which aspects of their solution they needed to hold tight to, and which could be adapted to local context and needs. **Learn to Earn Dayton**, for example, launched and refined its PACCE model in two neighboring school districts. Subsequently it has expanded to eight additional districts in the county, and is partnering with another intermediary to expand to Cleveland. In planning for expansion, they articulated which elements new districts had to commit to upholding, yet gave flexibility in how they structured those elements.

## 2. Actors: Distribute power among those closest to the problem and empower members to learn from one another's strengths.

Building an inclusive field only fulfills its promise when members become active contributors, not passive participants. The most sustainable capacity-building comes from within. Accelerate ED created structured opportunities for communities to recognize and share their own expertise. This approach builds collective efficacy, reduces long-term dependence on external support, and ensures solutions are grounded in practitioner insights.

Accelerate ED demonstrated that practitioners closest to the work often have the most valuable insights for implementation challenges—we worked to surface that expertise and create conditions for peers to learn from one another. When

communities see themselves as contributors, not just recipients, the field grows stronger.

Early on, in partnership with Community Design Partners, we started with problem definition and empathy interviews seeking to understand from those most proximate to the problems and to intentionally value and bring in student voice. We created an Accelerate ED Advisory Council that entrusted members of the community with designing key elements and community learning activities. We created opportunities for informal engagement between members, translated learning between contexts, and nurtured a culture where people didn't just connect at the scheduled times, they picked up the phone when they needed each other.



*Accelerate ED Advisory Council members Jennifer Mellor, Sade Randall, Yvonne Benton, Alissa Peltzman, Wendolyn Davis, Chessye Moseley, CD Morton, Stephanie Thompson, Richard Maez, and Lazaro Lopez.*

In a social network analysis workshop for Accelerate ED, Jennifer Lawlor and Danielle Varda of [Visible Network Labs](#) demonstrated that large numbers of “weak” ties such as professional connections are crucial ways for individuals to bridge different social networks - providing access to new information, awareness of innovations, and diverse perspectives. Our community fostered these ties across geographic divides, supporting growth in the field a number of ways, such as:

- **UP Partnership** in San Antonio and **E3 Alliance** in Austin began a regional collaboration as a result of recognizing there are gaps in pathway infrastructure in rapidly developing regions in between the metro areas.
- After Cohort 2’s presentations of their Blueprints for Scale, **Colorado Succeeds** policy director reached out to **McClure**

**Foundation** to learn from Vermont’s state advocacy work. McClure Foundation then learned from Colorado Succeeds about connecting prior learning assessments and apprenticeship to an Associates degree.

- Following an Accelerate ED Learning Visit to **Illinois District 214, CTE Foundation** in Sonoma County, CA reached out to fellow participants from **YouthForce NOLA** in New Orleans and **ElevateEdAZ** in Phoenix to dig more deeply into how they built a scalable work-based learning infrastructure. Learning from peers further in the journey informed CTE Foundation’s launch of a countywide internship program. In its first few months, the program placed 100+ students across Sonoma County in internships across 42 employers.

*“The multi-state collaborative aspect of the convenings allowed bringing a different conversation to my campus and allowed me to see implementation in action. It has been amazing to bring real world examples back and authentically engage our partners about where we need to go next to be effective, explore how big we can dream, and how to begin building. I hope that openly ideating without fear will continue.”*

- Wendolyn Davis, Executive Director of Pathway Alignment, Chattanooga State Community College

### **3. Knowledge Base: Recognize that public goods alone create limited change: communities need support to translate tools to their context.**

Central to the efforts of a field is a credible knowledge base of research and tools that help actors analyze shared barriers and carry out solutions. Regions joined Accelerate ED with significant variation in partnerships, and intermediaries needed a way to benchmark their readiness to scale pilot programs and to effect change within the

systems. Accelerate ED both drew on the previously existing knowledge base and produced a new set of valuable public goods. These goods became more powerful when paired with coaching that helped communities ask: *How does this solve our specific challenge? What do we need to adapt? Who needs to be involved for this to work here?*

# Knowledge Tools for Communities

<b>Diagnostic &amp; Planning Tools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Needs Assessment, Student Empathy Interview Protocol, Enabling Conditions Scan, Pathways Self-Assessment, Ready to Deliver Diagnostic</li> </ul>
<b>Blueprint Templates</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Framed development and analysis of vision, goals, proximate voices, program design, enabling conditions, delivery plan, sustainability</li> </ul>
<b>Communications &amp; Messaging Tools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student storytelling videos, messaging architecture frameworks, communications assets, templated 1-pagers for adaptation</li> </ul>
<b>Custom Research on Request</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Just-in-time "Ask a Librarian" responses, state policy research, and responsive research from coaches</li> </ul>
<b>Data Guidance &amp; MLE Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recommended Progress and Outcome Indicators, Data Storytelling Workshop</li> </ul>
<b>Issue Briefs for Practitioners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scaling Near Peer Mentoring, Cross-Sector Data Partnerships, Pathways Mapping, Work-Based Learning Case Study</li> </ul>

ACCELERATE ED | EDUCATION STRATEGY GROUP

Communities need thought partners who can help them move from awareness of a tool to contextualized application. This is especially true for tools related to cross-sector collaboration, where the how matters as much as the what. [Delivery Associates](#), through its Ready-to-Deliver Diagnostic, helped intermediaries assess their implementation capacity using a 10-element framework and identify their strengths as well as blind spots. Other examples below illustrate how Accelerate ED produced a range of public goods to help regions tackle their work, and translated the resources for local context to result in tangible impact.

## Policy

- **Massachusetts Alliance for Early College** engaged in cost modeling to help them understand the range of costs that pilot sites would experience to better support a second cohort of pilot sites. Research on state funding models helped them engage in legislative advocacy for sustained funding.
- **McClure Foundation** in Vermont developed policy research and communications assets to build public will for accelerated degree pathways available to every young person. McClure convened a broad group of partners to elevate student voice and share how messaging around a universally available, free associate degree drives enrollment among low-income students, even though they were eligible for free tuition before this program.

## Data

- **ElevateEdAZ's** high-quality pathways analysis is influencing school district and state decisions to prioritize CTE pathways and credentials that lead to higher wages and economic mobility.
- **EmployIndy** created a toolkit to outline the purpose of work-based and career-connected learning activities and built data dashboards for high schools and employer partners to support engagement and participation.

## Communications

- CTE Foundation of Sonoma County leveraged its communications assets, created in partnership with [Friday](#), to help counselors across 20+ high schools provide consistent and clear messages about the value of pathways to students and families.
- MCAN and the Michigan Department of Education created statewide adaptable communications materials and strategies for schools to use in intentional, targeted campaigns to increase participation by low-income, students of color, and first-generation college students in dual enrollment and Early/Middle Colleges.

*“Team Vermont has been introduced to an incredible bench of researchers and facilitators in the accelerated pathways space and is thrilled to now have cross-state colleagues navigating similar state policy goals and contexts. The deep technical assistance and 1:1 coaching [have been most valued]. The ESG team’s really deep understanding of enabling and limiting conditions made for exceptionally tailored and timely supports and the right matchmaking to those who could provide the right supports at the right time.”*

- Carolyn Weir, Executive Director, McClure Foundation

## 4. Infrastructure: Build an inclusive field that honors the diversity of its members’ contexts, and design for belonging and contribution from the start.

Scaling participation in quality accelerated pathways in the selected regions was always the ultimate outcome of Accelerate ED. At the same time, we felt responsible for building a field where practitioners see themselves as co-creators of solutions, where context and content are both honored, and where all of the work is relationship-driven. We tried to learn when to provide structure, when to step back, and how to ensure communities were always learning with and from each other.

This meant resisting the urge to descend in with solutions and instead spending time learning: *What has this community already tried? Where are the relationships strong or fragile? What do we know about the enabling conditions?* For example, how do policies, funding structures, or accountability systems enable or constrain their work? Effective support to sites requires deep understanding of local political dynamics, partnership history, policy constraints, capacity realities, and key players.

The value of the “community as a strategy” lies heavily in building the high trust and relational infrastructure that allows the field to grow and sustain itself. We created space for people to connect as individuals, not just leaders. We intentionally designed informal touchpoints, fun dinners and optional runs during convenings, and 1:1 and small group connectors during both virtual and in-person sessions – where members could share who they are beyond their work roles.

Our community design relied on a guided structure which included a shared process and timeline that created accountability and trust. Everyone was climbing the same mountain at the same time, but taking different routes and sharing what they were learning along the way.

- Peer consultancies enabled teams to wrestle with particular challenges that were common across geographies
- Blueprint Design reviews featured peer reviews with both written and live

feedback sessions, providing reviewers with deep knowledge of another community and perspective of someone working in the space

- Convening breakout sessions and virtual learning series sessions regularly featured individuals from across multiple sites, deepening relationships and learning through collaboration

How a community defines membership and creates entry points will shape whether it becomes a movement. We were intentionally inclusive by welcoming sites into Accelerate ED at different stages of maturity, honoring diverse organizational types (not just traditional intermediaries), and engaging people across roles (not only executive leaders). Accelerate ED's strength was creating a learning community where participants felt they belonged rather than were being evaluated. From day one, we signaled that we valued what members bring:

their questions, their context, and their expertise.

Turnover is inevitable; staff leave, elected officials change, funding shifts. The structures and support of the field need to withstand these transitions. This means anchoring network membership to organizations and cross-role teams, not individuals, and creating multiple pathways for onboarding new leaders without losing institutional memory. Accelerate ED built relationships across sectors and roles (intermediaries, district leaders, college partners, employers, community-based organizations), ensuring that when one person left, the work didn't collapse. Over time, we saw opportunities to continue reaching those closest to the work and welcomed teams to bring in new colleagues. Broadening the tent of the community helped to evolve who gets exposure and maintain momentum when key members moved on.

*“Special shoutout to the Learning Visits and the sites that gave us the ability to see the work on the ground level and the lessons learned. From a personal and professional perspective, it gave me coming from Indiana and working in a specific policy context the opportunity to see best practices in the context of the local and state conditions in other places, which was extraordinarily valuable.”*

- Nate Klinck, Vice President of Policy + Innovation, EmployIndy

## **5. Resources: Be clear about the stages of work and what investment makes sense given where a site is focusing on their journey.**

Moving communities through intensive planning requires financial investment. Resources enable teams to dedicate staff time to this work rather than treating it as an add-on to existing responsibilities, creating space for thoughtful strategic planning and cross-sector collaboration. For the majority of the sites in the Accelerate ED community, the Gates Foundation provided one-time investments in planning activities. Yet these investments in planning helped sites - and the field - secure considerable public and philanthropic investments to implement

pathways programs. Eleven of the twelve intermediaries in the first cohort secured additional funding for implementation of pathways programming in their communities. The momentum and visibility of these efforts has led to expanded investment by additional national philanthropies in the pathways field at the local, state, and national levels, and perhaps more importantly, has led to further public investment in these efforts from California to New York.

# What We Would Do Differently

We didn't get everything right in Accelerate ED, and the pivots we made offer lessons relevant to other field-building initiatives.

- 1. Give clarity at the start about the ultimate measure of success.** We initially focused too hard on the concept of a “Year 13” that enables students to earn an Associates degree one year out of high school before shifting based on experience and community feedback that - in many but not all communities - the concept of a 13th year was out of sync with state accountability and funding systems, confusing to families, and infeasible to scale to every student. Instead of anchoring on the Year 13 message, we should have centered the measure of success as the number of students accessing all components of the accelerated pathway: a sequence of dual enrollment credits toward a degree, integrated work-based learning, and high-quality advising.
- 2. Build in a planning runway to give sites visibility on the end product of their work.** To some extent, all initiatives build as they fly based on emerging needs and learning along the way. But because of the urgency we felt to add momentum to the good work sites had in place, we moved too fast at the start. As a result, sites didn't see the whole roadmap and template for the Blueprint Design Sprint at the outset, nor did they understand whether there would be ongoing engagement and funding after the Design phase. We would have served them better to have that infrastructure in place at the start of the Blueprint process.
- 3. Create more defined ways for employer partners to engage.** Industry partners have been critical members of the Accelerate ED community, and several of the Accelerate ED intermediaries are business-led. Yet, Accelerate ED's employer engagement work most often focused on building the capacity of intermediaries and schools to develop and strengthen their partnerships with employers. Accelerate ED itself could have created more well-defined, low-lift entry points for employers themselves to sit at the table and drive how Accelerate ED could contribute directly to their regional talent pipelines.



# Implications for Future Field-Building

Accelerate ED built the foundation and momentum for how the accelerated pathways movement grows and evolves. At the time it was launched, schools implementing these approaches - and intermediaries to support them - were scattered across the country. To move from the “emerging” to “forming” phase, the field needed a collaborative community to support the connective tissue necessary for more consistent impact.

The idea of integrating pathways components is more prevalent and pervasive, alignment of state level policies is coming to fruition, and intermediary leadership has stepped up in this space. Accelerate ED community members continue to lead the field through service on the Commission on Purposeful Pathways, established to create the next vision for the field.

Leveraging a community as a field-building strategy worked particularly well for Accelerate ED because the initiative sought to (a) demonstrate new approaches that were not widely adopted; (b) to influence broader field awareness among key practitioners and policymakers; and (c) enlist new actors to

serve as change agents in their communities.

These three goals wouldn't be achieved through traditional grantmaking approaches used by philanthropy and competitive government programs, such as grants to selected entities to implement proven strategies by working independently. Thus Accelerate ED was designed in a cohort approach where multiple sites were engaged in a structured design process with individual coaching and community support. This community approach fostered a cadre of intermediary leaders with the ability to influence programming offered by partners, and to serve as visible leaders in the field who could champion the work in publications, public forums such as industry conferences, and conversations with philanthropic and other thought leaders.

As Education Strategy Group supports and guides Accelerate ED's evolution into the Pathways Impact Collaborative, we're offering the following considerations for funders and organizations leading current and future “community as a strategy” efforts to build a field.

Funders seeking to establish and expand a community of actors to jump start field-building should:

1. **Create flexible guiding principles** to foster the design of creative solutions that can be adopted by a diverse set of communities, rather than being overly prescriptive about a single approach to how sites address the identified problem.
2. **Invest in community activities and community management** to provide sufficient resources for capacity building to individual organizations that may not have capacity in all the areas necessary to affect lasting change, such as communications, data systems, policy analysis and advocacy, and partnership stewardship and facilitation.
3. **Establish measurement expectations** from the start that answers three questions: What is our reach (e.g. how many students, schools, districts)? What core outcomes will each team track to enable cross-site learning and demonstrate impact? By when should we see results?
4. **Engage leadership and foster champions** at multiple executive and practitioner levels who can build partnerships locally, provide technical expertise, and champion spread once proof of concept is achieved.
5. **Commit to multi-year investments** that foster participation in the community across multiple phases of the work: from exploration to planning to implementation to scaling.
6. **Anticipate and manage for evolution** by building the structure in a way that allows innovation to work in additional contexts beyond the early adopters, and to set itself up for long-term sustainability by spinning out into new structures. Critically, the manager of the community must understand, be prepared for and have the capacity to manage through these shifts.

#### **ESG'S DISTINCTIVE APPROACH TO FIELD-BUILDING STRATEGIES**

Across multiple initiatives, ESG's approach consistently features:

1. Elevating what works to drive progress across political, geographic, and economic lines
2. Leading through inquiry, creating a culture of peer-driven learning
3. Centering the voice of students we serve
4. Paying attention to who is at the table
5. Building authentic, trusting relationships through consistent, genuine interaction over time
6. Facilitating experimentation, self-reflection and integration of feedback
7. Designing for lasting student impact, within and beyond the initiative

# Acknowledgments

This resource was authored by Ryan Reyna, Alissa Peltzman, Adam Lowe, and Cecilia Le of Education Strategy Group, with special thanks to Kristi Ransick and Kelly Van Beveren. We are deeply grateful to the incredible leaders, organizations, and partners that make up the Accelerate ED community, as well as our colleagues on the Gates Foundation Pathways Team. Your vision, ambition, and humility continue to drive better systems and futures for our nation's young people.

