

# BROADER PARTICIPATION, BROADER BENEFIT

INCREASING THE VALUE OF  
FOUNDATION EVALUATION

April 2021



A case study in evaluation co-design from the

**BILL & MELINDA**  
GATES *foundation*

# FOREWORD

Dear colleagues,

In recent years, philanthropy has been grappling with calls for increased transparency and more inclusive processes when it comes to making decisions about the best use of its resources. Some foundations have responded by focusing on listening and better integration of community feedback. Others are experimenting with participatory grantmaking as a means of transferring power to communities. Still others have leaned into exploring what it means to center equity in their grantmaking and operating practices.

Despite such promising efforts, foundation evaluation and learning practices largely remain unchanged. That is, foundations continue to roll out evaluations in the traditional way: funders craft requests for proposals with limited consultation from others, evaluators develop their approaches in silos, and one design is selected for implementation. The needs of foundations often take precedence over those of others with potential to benefit. Indeed, a recent Center for Evaluation Innovation study finds that 71 percent of foundations rarely give grantees and communities the power to shape evaluation.<sup>1</sup> The same report also finds challenges in evaluations generating meaningful insights for grantees and the field.

**This learning brief is about the possibility of what can happen when more voices are included in the process of evaluation design.**

It highlights an alternative way foundations can more equitably engage stakeholders in evaluation design and the benefits that result when they do. It tells the story of how our team partnered with Engage R+D to apply a creative, participatory technique—known as a design charrette—to engage a broad variety of stakeholders in collaboratively designing a summative evaluation of Networks for School Improvement, one of our signature K-12 investments.

We believe that when more people contribute to evaluation design, evaluations are more likely to generate meaningful insights for educators, practitioners, and the education field more broadly. It's interesting to reflect on this work in the current context in which we face limitations on gathering together in person along with a call to look even harder at whether our efforts are serving the needs of those we intend to benefit. An important takeaway from this work isn't necessarily that we all have to be in person in order for this to work, but that we have to step outside of the comfort zones we live in daily and actively make space for different voices and fresh ideas.

It is in this context, and in a spirit of continuous learning, that we are pleased to share this case study.

Regards,



Andy Sokatch  
Senior Program Officer  
Measurement, Evaluation & Learning, K-12 Education  
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

*“Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices,” page 16. (2020). Center for Evaluation Innovation. Retrieved at: [https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/cei\\_benchmarkinq2020/](https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/cei_benchmarkinq2020/).*



# OVERVIEW

Funders wield a tremendous amount of power when they commission evaluations of their work.

They decide what questions get answered, which data sources and designs are favored, and how reporting and engagement take shape. Traditional RFP processes reinforce this power dynamic by concentrating decision-making in the hands of foundation staff. They also constrain innovation—potential evaluators develop their approaches in silos and a single design is selected for implementation.

*But what might it look like to design and commission evaluation differently?*

This was the question the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation posed when it first approached Engage R+D in January 2019. Over the next eight months, we worked closely with foundation leaders to facilitate a process in which researchers, initiative partners, staff and grantees collaboratively designed an evaluation approach for the foundation’s largest K-12 investment. Ninety percent of participants reported that **co-designing the evaluation** in this manner produced better results than a typical RFP process, citing benefits such as increased transparency, more feasible evaluation designs, greater learning and collaboration, and a stronger focus on equity.

Given this success, we felt it was important to document and share what we learned from this effort. This case study draws on feedback gathered from participants through surveys and interviews and our team’s own experience designing and facilitating an evaluation-focused design charrette. It is organized into four parts:

- 1 **In Search of a New Approach** shares background on the foundation’s education grantmaking and what led staff to seek a new approach to evaluation.
- 2 **Getting Ready** outlines the arc of the charrette process and the steps needed to prepare for implementation.
- 3 **Charette Overview** provides a high-level summary of each design charrette workshop, with further detail in an appendix.
- 4 **Results and Reflections** examines the benefits of the co-design approach and implications for the field.

As this document lays out, design charrettes offer a promising model for bringing the participatory approach many foundations are embracing in their grantmaking to the area of evaluation. Ultimately, we hope that by sharing this story, more foundations will consider applying collaborative approaches to evaluation design and implementation. We believe that doing so will result in higher-quality evaluations that produce more meaningful insights—not only for foundations but also for grantees and other stakeholders in the field.

## WHAT IS CO-DESIGN?

The term “co-design” is short for collaborative design. **Within the philanthropic context, we define co-design as an approach that actively engages stakeholders who can affect or be affected by a foundation’s grantmaking and evaluation efforts in contributing to decisions about those efforts.** Such stakeholders may include:

- **Foundation staff and trustees** who have expertise in grantmaking and broad field knowledge.
- **Content experts** who offer scholarly and/or practical expertise in content areas.
- **Nonprofit grantees** who bring experience with the delivery of community services and supports.
- **Community members** who offer lived experience and on-the-ground perspective.

Co-design goes beyond consultation with individual stakeholder groups in that it builds and deepens collaboration across groups. This requires mitigating power dynamics to ensure equal voice and creating spaces that help people communicate, share insights, and test innovative ideas.

Done well, co-design has the potential to improve knowledge of community and grantee needs, generate more creative ideas to address needs, provide faster validation of potential solutions, and improve cooperation across stakeholders. Over time, this can lead to stronger relationships and greater collective buy-in.

# TRADITIONAL EVALUATION RFPs vs. A DESIGN CHARRETTE APPROACH

Foundations can broaden the benefits of the evaluations they commission by including more voices in evaluation design.

## TRADITIONAL

Grantees and other stakeholders have little input into evaluation design.

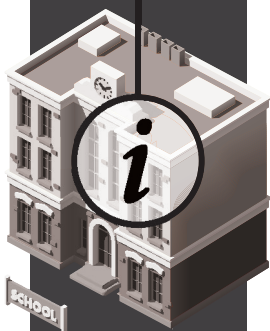
Foundation staff creates RFPs.

Limited consultation from grantees and other stakeholders.

Applicants develop their approaches in silos.

One design selected for implementation.

Foundation uses evaluation primarily for its own purposes.



## DESIGN CHARETTE

The Foundation engages a wide net of collective expertise to design the evaluation.

Foundation staff, experts, and grantees co-design the evaluation approach.

A strong facilitation team leads the group process.

Orient, build understanding, and generate questions.

Develop design sketches.

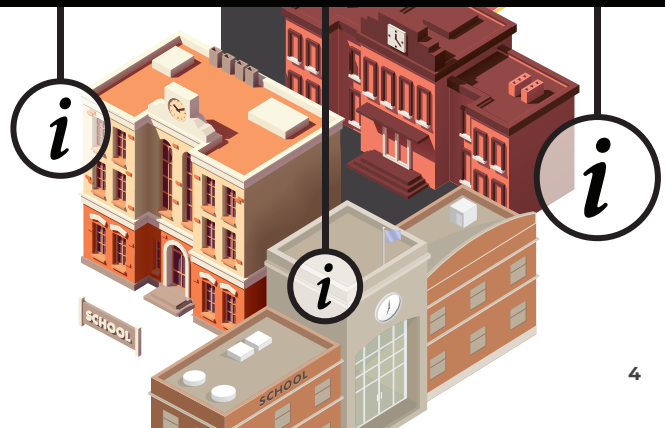
Test selected sketches with broader set of stakeholders.

WORKSHOP 1

WORKSHOP 2

WORKSHOP 3

Evaluation benefits more stakeholders due to inclusive, participatory design approach.



# IN SEARCH OF A NEW APPROACH

“ **Everything we do in education begins as an idea that educators bring to us.**

They're the ones who live and breathe this work, who have dedicated their careers to improving systems that are failing many students today, especially minority students. That's definitely true of our new strategy. We will work with networks of middle and high schools across the country to help them develop and implement their own strategies for overcoming the obstacles that keep students from succeeding. We will help these networks with the process: using key indicators of student success like grades and attendance to drive continuous learning and improvement. But the substance of the changes they make will depend on what local leaders and the available evidence say are most likely to be effective. **Melinda Gates, 2018 Annual Letter**<sup>2</sup>



When the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Network for Schools Improvement (NSI) initiative in late 2018, it set out to do something different. The foundation had been investing in education since the early 2000s, during which time it had pursued a variety of programmatic efforts—from supporting the creation of small schools, to funding efforts to improve teacher evaluations, to catalyzing the expansion of charter schools.

The problem was that these efforts weren't resulting in significant enough improvements in educational outcomes for Black, Latino, and low-income students. "What do you have to show for the billions you've spent on U.S. education?" posed Bill Gates in his and Melinda's 10th annual letter reflecting on their philanthropic efforts. "A lot, but not as much as either of us would like," was his candid assessment.

Reflecting on lessons learned across multiple investments, he went on to acknowledge: "To get widely adopted, an idea has to work for schools in a huge variety of settings: urban and rural, high-income and low-income, and so on. It also has to overcome the status quo. America's schools are, by design, not a top-down system."

It was by design then that the foundation's new NSI initiative moved away from one-size-fits all solutions imposed on schools by districts or state agencies and toward an approach that emphasizes empowering and building the capacity of school leaders and educators. NSI provides grants to intermediary organizations who support groups of middle and high schools working together to identify and solve common problems using approaches that best fit their needs. Each network has a commitment to continuous learning and improvement and using data to assess student learning, progress, and success [see box on next page].

*"Our 2018 Letter: 10 Tough Questions We Get Asked."* February 13, 2018.  
Retrieved from: <https://www.gatesnotes.com/2018-Annual-Letter>

## KEY FEATURES OF THE NETWORKS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT (NSI) INITIATIVE

The Gates Foundation released a Request for Proposals for the NSI initiative in February 2018. As of fall 2020, the foundation has invested over \$309 million in 32 NSIs across 20+ states. While prior Gates Foundation investments focused largely on state and district policies and practices, NSI focuses on building the capacity of principals and teachers to identify problems and address barriers to student success in their local communities. Key features of the NSI initiative include:

- **Bringing together networks of schools:** An intermediary organization—such as a nonprofit, university, or school district—connects middle and high schools to improve student outcomes by working together as part of a network.
- **With support from an intermediary:** Working directly with school leaders, the intermediary helps schools identify barriers to school success using existing information and a common problem to work on.
- **To implement continuous improvement:** Participating schools put in place strategies to tackle the problem based on evidence and what they know about their students, and use data to refine their strategies.
- **To track student outcomes:** Participating schools follow student outcomes and indicators that best predict educational success to assess if their efforts are having the impact they hope.
- **To learn together:** Schools also learn from each other about what's working, with whom, and why.

The NSI approach combines both rigor and flexibility. The Foundation is prescriptive about desired student outcomes, core elements of continuous improvement, and working as part of a network. Intermediary grantees have flexibility with regard to implementation of this approach, including how they identify participating schools, what supports they provide to networks and schools, and which tools and frameworks they employ.

## A FRESH LOOK AT EVALUATION

In addition to taking a new approach to grantmaking, the foundation was interested in taking a new approach to evaluating its work. Prior evaluations of the foundation's grantmaking had attracted a great deal of attention and, at times, critique. Were these evaluations asking the right questions? Were the designs sensitive enough to assess the value of different approaches across different contexts? To what extent were evaluations serving the needs not only of the foundation but also of grantees and the broader education community?



What do you have to show for the billions you've spent on U.S. education?  
A lot, but not as much as either of us would like." **Bill Gates**

With NSI, the foundation had an opportunity to rethink its approach to evaluation design and use. Bob Hughes, Director of the Gates Foundation K-12 Education program, had a background in nonprofit leadership and experience participating in foundation-funded evaluation. He was interested in supporting evaluation that would be useful for both education practitioners and the broader research community. He explained, "We've used traditional random control trial (RCT) methodologies and have not necessarily honored requirements specifying a clear problem that doesn't evolve over time. We've been reliant on RCTs when we should be thinking through mixed-method strategies that enable us to get at when NSIs are an appropriate solution and when they're not, what enabling conditions are necessary to successfully implement it in context, and a sense of the adaptation or fidelity needed to ensure it has impact." Such information, he felt, would be more valuable to the field of education.

The foundation’s deputy directors, all of whom had worked at the foundation for over 10 years, were also in agreement on the need for a new approach. Jamie McKee commented: “The process that the foundation normally uses to design and execute evaluations wasn’t getting us what we needed, either internally or externally. Externally, it seemed like the evaluation designs we were using weren’t as adaptive as they needed to be. Internally, we were looking for a process that would give us more complete and more complex information over time.” Adam Tucker agreed, and noted that the foundation was simultaneously seeking to engage a larger group of researchers and evaluators than it had worked with in the past: “We were really interested in trying to bring new and different people and voices into the mix. In order to do that, we needed to get to know them and they needed to get to know us.”

Additionally, Andy Sokatch, Senior Program Officer with responsibility for measurement, evaluation and learning, saw value in broadening participation in the evaluation design. At the outset of the process, he noted “My hope is the charrette facilitates the creation of a research agenda that is far more robust and diverse than if our team, with the input of a couple people, came up with an RFP.” He went on to note, “Experience has taught me that buy-in from the top is not enough to make a research project happen. If we design a perfect project that has the nod of the head from the ED of the network who got a ten million-dollar grant, that’s not enough. We need the buy-in from the people doing the work every day, or it won’t be any good.”

In summary, the foundation was hoping to land on an evaluation approach that provided more nuanced information than past RCT approaches, accounted for grantee adaptation and innovation, reflected a greater breadth and diversity of field thinking, and cultivated buy-in from grantees working on the ground.



## LANDING ON THE DESIGN CHARRETTE

Launch of its new grantmaking initiative combined with shared interest in a new approach on the part of internal leaders created a unique window of opportunity for the foundation to try out a new and innovative approach to evaluation design. Over the course of several months, the idea of bringing together a diverse group of people—education and research experts, initiative partners and grantees—to co-develop the NSI evaluation began to emerge. For Hughes, promoting collaboration across stakeholders on the design had potential to be tremendously valuable: “There will always be different points of view [about which approach is best] given the roles different actors play. Let’s make those as transparent as possible so wise choices can be made, understanding both costs and benefits.”

Foundation staff recognized that a process would be needed to enable collaboration across such an incredibly diverse group. The idea of hosting a **design charrette**, a participatory planning approach, began to take shape [see sidebar]. According to staff members, the foundation wanted to do evaluation in a more flexible way, and the charrette process aligned with its interests in supporting solutions developed by school leaders and educators through its grantmaking and understanding perspectives at that level.

The foundation acknowledged that using a charrette to co-design a summative evaluation approach for its largest K-12 investment was not without its risks. One concern was whether the parties gathered would play well together. Academics, for example, are known for having deep expertise that often correlates with strong opinions about best-in-class evaluation designs and educational approaches. Another concern was whether the process could overcome power dynamics and the potential for some participants to use the process as a way to gain favor with the foundation. There was also uncertainty about whether it was possible to substantively engage such a large group in the timeframe desired by foundation staff. Finally, there was an acknowledgement of potential reputational risk. What if the process didn’t go well and raised expectations that the foundation could not meet?

In the end, excitement about the possibilities of the approach outweighed potential risks, which were viewed as manageable. The charrette had potential to broaden the foundation’s perspective on what designs were possible, to infuse new thinking into its work, and to bring together staff, experts, partners, and grantees in ways that benefitted all parties. In early 2019, the foundation decided to move forward viewing the charrette as an experiment with potential to help the foundation and others develop new ways of working together.

## UNDERSTANDING DESIGN CHARRETTES

The National Charrette Institute (NCI) defines the charrette as a “collaborative planning event that harnesses the talents and energies of all affected parties to create and support a feasible plan that represents transformative community change.”\* Charrettes are commonly used in the urban planning and design fields as a technique for consulting with professionals alongside stakeholders who will be impacted by a given project or product.

Charrettes typically occur over multiple sessions so that participants can deeply engage with key information, understand context, and create relationships over time. Working together, stakeholders and professionals clarify key goals and needs and develop different design options to address those. They then identify and flesh out preferred designs and get feedback from a broader set of stakeholders to test feasibility and acceptance of concepts. The consecutive, multi-day aspect of a charrette creates a compressed time frame that facilitates creative problem-solving and cultivates agreement on the best way forward.

*\*The National Charrette Institute is part of Michigan State University’s School of Planning, Design & Construction. <https://www.canr.msu.edu/nci>*



While design charrettes are common in other fields, the Foundation was unable to locate an example of another foundation applying this approach to the development of an evaluation. It quickly realized that the process of getting ready for this work would require addressing a number of questions. What might the process look like? Who should design and facilitate it? How would individuals be selected for participation? What would be needed to set things up for success? This section of the report describes major planning steps and decisions made at the onset of this work.

## IMAGINING THE ARC OF DESIGN

While Foundation leaders were intrigued by the idea of the charrette, they wanted to get a better understanding of what the process might look like before giving it final approval. Foundation staff did more research to understand the arc of a typical design charrette, and found that it included a planning phase, during which the sponsoring organization identifies participants, selects a facilitator, and conducts research about what's needed to support a successful process. The charrette itself takes place over multiple days and involves establishing a shared vision for the work, developing design options, prioritizing and fleshing out options, and obtaining broader feedback.

The NSI design charrette, however, was breaking new ground in applying this approach to research. Designing a large and complex evaluation also has its own set of steps. These include learning about a program or initiative; exploring what's important to evaluate from the perspective of different users; identifying priority research questions; considering potential data sources and methods; selecting an evaluation design; and fleshing out an implementation plan.

As trained researchers, foundation evaluation staff knew these steps well. The question was how to mesh these with a more standard charrette approach. Staff developed an initial sketch of what this could look like to be further refined in collaboration with an outside consultant [see below].

## EARLY FOUNDATION SKETCH OF THE NSI DESIGN CHARRETTE

**Workshop 1: Define the problem.** In this first session, we'll orient everyone to the foundation's goals for this process and dig into the work of the NSI portfolio, including the other measurement and data collection activities already underway. By the end of this workshop, we will have a common understanding of the work of the NSIs and a set of collaboratively defined goals for the evaluation, associated research questions, and guardrails and constraints for the evaluation activities.

**Workshop 2: Propose and refine evaluation approaches.** In this session, we'll brainstorm and refine evaluation approaches for each of the research questions. Our goal is to identify the most rigorous feasible approach for each question. We anticipate that the result will be a collection of relatively narrow evaluation activities, not one single evaluation. By the end of this workshop, we will have a set of high-level evaluation designs, an articulation of the expertise required to carry them out, and decision criteria for which NSIs would be evaluated under each design.

**Workshop 3: Finalize evaluation designs.** In this session, we will flesh out detailed plans, including timelines and key design criteria, for each of the evaluation activities.

## FINDING A FACILITATOR

Gates recognized that it would need support from a strong and seasoned partner to design and facilitate the charrette process. Good facilitation would be critical to keeping charrette participants motivated and ensuring involvement by all participants in discussions. After talking with potential partners, the foundation selected Engage R+D due to our firm's experience organizing and facilitating large group convenings, our expertise in both evaluation and philanthropy, and our team's passion for innovation. We partnered with Christina Garcia, an independent consultant with expertise in philanthropy and nonprofit intermediaries, to co-design and facilitate this effort. Our combined team brought a commitment to promoting equity and inclusion and actively looked for opportunities to weave these into the charrette.

During the course of this effort, foundation staff and the Engage R+D team developed a strong working partnership. We spent time getting to know one another and exploring the role and perspectives of key players within the foundation. We met weekly throughout the course of the project to co-develop the charrette approach and review planned exercises and materials. We also had candid conversations about how the foundation needed to show up—setting clear parameters for the work, taking a listening stance, and owning key decisions in the process. Overall, we were able to develop a sense of trust and mutual respect that enabled each of us to collaborate and play our roles effectively.



## SELECTING CHARRETTE PARTICIPANTS

Charrettes commonly include anywhere from 25 to 50 participants who hold different perspectives that can contribute to the success of a project. This includes people who will use, implement, and/or be affected by a project as well as outside professionals who hold specialized expertise. Working in collaboration with Engage R+D, the foundation identified the following groups to include the charrette process.

- **Researchers and evaluators.** These participants came from disciplines such as education, policy, economics, sociology, psychology and management and brought expertise in different types of evaluation designs, education reform approaches, and school settings. The foundation was particularly interested in fresh perspectives on equity, race, and class in education and included people they thought could push thinking on this front. Finally, participants included people well-known to the foundation along with people newer to the foundation.
- **NSI partners.** The foundation partners with four primary organizations to support NSI grantees. Catalyst:Ed facilitates a grantee community of practice, the Center for Public Research Leadership conducted formative evaluation activities, Double Line Partners helps grantees source data for their work, and Partners for Network Improvements helps grantees assess network health and quality. These partners offer a valuable line of sight that cuts across the work of different grantees, and all four were invited to participate in the charrette process.
- **NSI grantees.** The foundation was interested in including NSI grantees in the process but wanted to do that in a thoughtful way, maximizing the value of their participation while minimizing burden. Ultimately, the foundation landed on a multi-pronged approach. A small subset of grantees contributed on-the-ground perspectives about the work and the evaluation early in the charrette process. Later, a broader set reviewed and provided feedback on proposed evaluation designs. Along the way, the foundation and our team kept grantees up to date on the process and gathered additional input through surveys and community of practice conversations.
- **Foundation executives and staff.** Consideration was also given to the inclusion of foundation staff. On one hand, inviting all relevant staff would help cultivate buy-in for this work. However, the foundation was most interested in honoring the space for and voice of external stakeholders. Ultimately, the K-12 Director, three K-12 Deputies, and two measurement, learning & evaluation staff participated in the entire charrette. Additional foundation staff joined the final workshop to provide feedback on proposed evaluation designs.

Ultimately, the foundation invited 38 individuals to serve as core participants attending all three charrette workshops. This included 22 content experts, ten NSI support partners, and six foundation leaders. The majority of participants received a stipend for participating in the process, and all travel expenses were covered.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, eight grantees were invited to participate virtually or in person at different points during the three workshops, and ten foundation staff members participated in the final charrette workshop which focused on pressure-testing proposed evaluation designs.

<sup>3</sup>Evaluation firms likely to bid on RFPs resulting from the NSI design charrette process received a stipend for one individual from their organization to attend. They had the option to include another staff member, who did not receive stipend support. NSI support partners and grantees did not receive a stipend.

## GATHERING INPUT AND IDEAS

Once participants were identified, a crucial next step involved engaging with them to share goals for this process and solicit their ideas and feedback regarding how to make it a success. We developed tailored approaches to engaging each group.

- We conducted one-on-one interviews with **charrette participants** to learn about their background and expertise and obtain their perspective regarding opportunities and challenges with the proposed process. We also held an orientation webinar to share what we learned and prepare them for the process.
- We attended standing calls of **NSI partners** to share the charrette approach as it was developing and obtain their feedback along with what they were hearing from grantees.
- We attended an in-person **grantee** community of practice meetings to provide information about the charrette process and to hear what was important to them to understand in their work, the learning questions they were asking themselves, and their perspective on the time it might take to see impact.
- We surveyed **foundation staff** to solicit their feedback and questions. We also conducted a webinar to share what we heard and address questions and concerns that were on their mind.

With all groups, our team listened carefully and made a point to act on what we heard [see box]. Recalling this period, one implementation partner shared, “The first interview reflected a real interest in understanding what people cared about, what people thought about, what people hoped for... You could see it designed into the work that [they] had listened to [us].” Another participant viewed this engagement as an early sign of “inclusion and respect.”

## THEMES FROM PRE-CHARRETTE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT\*

- **Excited** about being part of an innovative approach, and **value** the idea of bringing diverse stakeholders with a range of expertise to develop a stronger evaluation.
- **Open-minded** about different approaches and expertise people bring to the table and comfortable with some ambiguity around the process.
- To prepare for the workshops, participants need a deep **understanding** of the initiative and **clarity about the process** (e.g., Who makes the ultimate decision? What are the parameters set by the foundation?).
- **Key challenges:** Minimizing pitches and positioning across participants; balancing multiple perspectives; supporting communication across disciplines; establishing focus; creating safe space and comfort.
- **Recommendations:** Grantee voice is critical; build rapport and dispel assumptions; set the tone and norms for collaboration; preparation and level-setting are key; create space for reflection and rejuvenation; foundation staff should model collaboration and be positioned as listeners and learners.

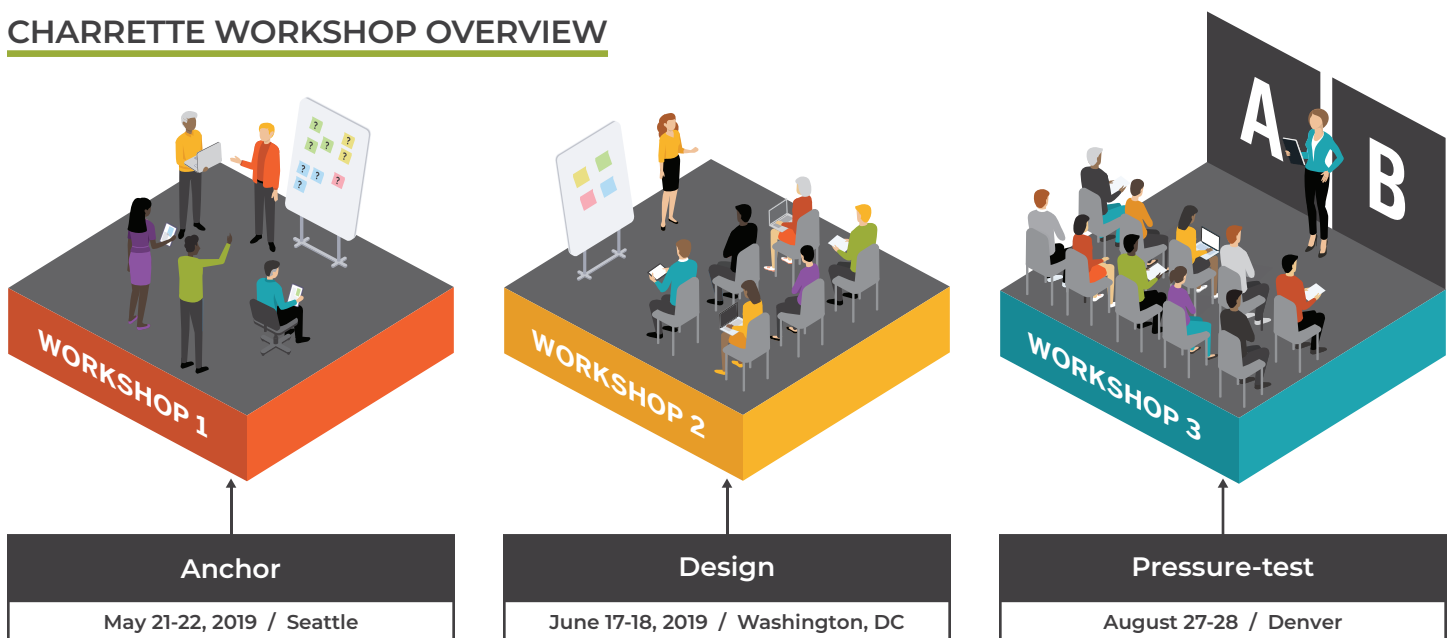
*\* Adapted from an orientation webinar for NSI Design Charrette participants held May 10, 2019.*

# CHARRETTE OVERVIEW

# 3

Going live with the charrette involved thinking through how to structure the work effectively over the course of three workshops. Ensuring enough time for substantive engagement without leaving participants fatigued was critical, as was maintaining momentum while still allowing enough time to plan, make decisions, and prepare materials in between meetings. Below is a high-level overview of each workshop. Further detail on each can be found in the appendix, along with guidance on how to make a process like this a success.

## CHARRETTE WORKSHOP OVERVIEW



The primary goal of the first workshop was to develop research questions that would serve as an anchor for the evaluation design. But first, we had to set the tone for collaborative design and build participants' understanding of the NSI work. This involved helping people to get to know one another, setting norms and expectations for our work together, and creating opportunities for participants to hear from foundation staff, partners, and grantees about the work taking place. We then used quiet brainstorming and brainwriting activities to generate and prioritize research questions.

The primary goal of the second workshop was to develop sketches of potential evaluation designs in response to the questions developed at the first meeting and later prioritized by foundation staff. To move to that step, we first spent time digging deeper into two topics—how equity was showing up in the work and what kinds of data sources would be feasible in the context of grantees' work. After that, small teams of participants sketched out evaluation designs for assigned topic areas, including key questions, anticipated learning contribution, methodological approach, timeline, data sources, expertise, and budget. Following the workshop, the foundation reviewed and streamlined the nine resulting sketches and released a request for three concept memos focused on different elements of the NSI work. Six concept memos were received by the foundation. Of these, three were selected for further vetting.

The purpose of the third and final workshop was to gather feedback on the three concepts selected from a broader set of charrette participants (including newly invited grantees and staff) and to generate ideas for ongoing collaboration in ways that would benefit this work. Using a World Café approach, participants broke into groups and provided feedback on the concept memos. Participants were explicitly encouraged to comment on the extent to which grantee use and burden, along with equity and rigor, were considered in each design approach. Concept teams then met and proposed revisions to designs based on stakeholder feedback. Meanwhile, participants engaged in other activities designed to promote future collaboration and to reflect on the value of the charrette process. The process concluded with a celebration of the good work that had been accomplished and the relationships developed through this effort.

Overall, foundation staff, academics and researchers, implementation partners, and grantees felt that the design charrette was well worth the time and resources invested. One of the academic participants characterized this as a “golden opportunity” to try something different, and reflected, “It was really a big bet by the foundation on this complex initiative, which did not seem well-suited for traditional business-as-usual evaluation approaches.” One of the implementation partners agreed and pointed out that the process accomplished more than just evaluation design: “The end result is something that more people can buy into and have clarity around, in addition to making sure that the questions are the right questions.” Below we describe how, by bringing this group of stakeholders together in a different way, the design charrette largely achieved its intended goals and generated some additional benefits.

## IMPACT WITH RESPECT TO INTENDED GOALS

### Leveraged collective expertise



Foundation staff shared that, with traditional RFP processes, leadership often asks about who may have not submitted a proposal and what ideas would have arisen had more people responded. The charrette addressed these concerns by engaging a diverse set of stakeholders in creative and collaborative activities. Sokatch noted, “We had enough breadth of expertise in the room that we didn’t have a huge miss in terms of ideas and partners left uninvited or unheard from. In looking back, we also would have benefitted from input from students, teachers, and families for whom this work is intended to serve.” An evaluation firm representative pointed out that this process can help the foundation “work with a broader swath of people instead of the usual suspects,” adding, “There’s risk to the foundation, so they want to go with the known entities because you know exactly what you’re going to get. But at the same time, there are costs in getting the same thing...Broadening the field and broadening diversity is important, and if the foundation wants to do that in all areas of its work, it’ll have to do things differently.” Overall, participants gave the charrette “high marks” on this goal, noting the representation of experts from multiple fields, geographies, and viewpoints.

### Generated multiple ideas



As described in the previous section, the charrette process incorporated creative exercises that encouraged participants to think expansively without the constraints typically given in an evaluation RFP. The workshops included dedicated time for learning about the initiative; hearing from the funders, grantees, and support partners; and thinking deeply about evaluation questions and approaches. Because of this, a foundation staff member explained, “It gave people time and space to understand the program more deeply. And that hopefully translates into better evaluation work—just by stretching out the product and giving everybody more time to think.”

Participants agreed that the charrette process was “very, very successful in generating a wide field of view on things we might look into.” One support partner remarked, “Definitely a lot of ideas were generated through the various charrettes, the first couple of charrettes in particular, lots of different ideas.” This sentiment was shared broadly among workshop participants.

## Pressure-tested design



Much of the final workshop was dedicated to presenting initial evaluation concepts and providing and incorporating feedback. Because charrette participants came from a variety of backgrounds and brought a range of expertise, they were able to collectively raise a well-rounded set of questions and concerns. Jamie McKee felt that this aspect of the charrette was a success, commenting, “On the designs that we had, the process really successfully got lots of different disciplinary folks to give feedback and make those better. That landed really well.” Andy Sokatch pointed out the efficiency of this process, explaining, “We got so much amazing feedback from so many stakeholders in a day and a half. Just imagine sending this thing out to reviewers. You could never get this level of feedback. So that is amazing, the breadth and depth and speed and efficiency of feedback is just unmatched.”

One particularly unique aspect of the design charrette was the opportunity for grantees to provide feedback to potential evaluators earlier in the process. This meant that the initial concepts were already further along than they would have been with a traditional RFP, as they reflected grantee-informed considerations related to utility and feasibility. One grantee shared, “We as grantees had lots of opportunities to give really targeted feedback that certain things were not going to work, or certain things didn’t align with our understanding of the work or the way that we’re currently doing the work...and we really got to see at the end of the process the actual adoption of some of those ideas.”

## Comprehensive and rigorous



As discussed in the previous section, the end products of the final charrette were established evaluation teams and working drafts of the designs. Following the final workshop, Foundation staff and evaluation teams continued to refine and finalize the designs. Ninety percent of participants agreed that the design charrette process was better than a typical RFP process, with many noting that it resulted in a stronger evaluation design than would have come out of an RFP.

While the feedback overall was positive, there were two areas where participants felt the workshop process fell short, as detailed below. First, a number of participants felt that while important conversations about equity took place through the charrette, these did not necessarily translate deeply enough into the evaluation designs. As one of the academic researchers reflected, “The conversations [about equity] were rich and...the design charrette process itself encouraged that discussion. I was a little bit disheartened [that]...I didn’t see as much of it in the proposals as I was hoping to, even after the discussion of the proposals. It felt like something people were talking about and talking around, but not necessarily showing clearly how it was going to come through in the work.”

Several foundation staff expressed agreement with this sentiment. Adam Tucker shared, “We were successful in at least raising issues of diversity, equity, inclusion in the work,” but noted, “I don’t know that they were completely resolved, which I’m not even sure was possible or intended.” Jamie McKee agreed, adding that, “We had moments where we really dug in and then moments where we let ourselves off the hook. So, I want to say [we did] better than average but not nearly good enough for the attention that this issue demands in the context of a strategy focused on equity.” There was recognition overall about the need to find intentional ways to strengthen this aspect of the work. One participant noted: “[Equity] still feels not quite as integrated as it could be, so I worry that when it comes down to it—a couple years in, when they’re starting to get worried about budgets and timelines—that this is the thing that gets left [behind]. But,” this person acknowledged, “I do think they’re ahead of where they would have been otherwise.”

Finally, a handful of participants commented that the resulting evaluation designs appeared to be traditional in many respects, rather than new or innovative. Jamie McKee, for example, expected more variance among the designs. Similarly, one of the grantees hoped to see more innovative approaches for evaluating a continuous improvement initiative, commenting that the designs “don’t really feel like they’re different at all, despite the fact that these improvement projects are actually different.”

## **OTHER BENEFITS OF THE CHARRETTE PROCESS**

In addition to the stated goals of the charrette, participants felt that the design charrette process offered several advantages over a traditional RFP process, as outlined below.

The process facilitated **greater transparency of discussion between funders and evaluators**. The facilitated process helped funders and evaluators understand one another more deeply and unpack the needs and constraints that each bring to the table. Many participants called out the inclusion of foundation staff as a unique and valuable aspect of the charrette. One of the academic researchers observed, “I’ve never been a part of a conventional RFP process where I had this kind of empathetic perspective on the role of the granting agency.” This person explained that traditional RFP processes do not typically shed light on the “psychology of the granting agency” and the pressures they may be under, but, “It was really clear in this case—with the transparency of the NSI program at Gates Foundation—that they themselves were accountable for the results of this whole project.”

Likewise, Foundation staff gained a **deeper and more nuanced understanding of evaluation possibilities**. Bob Hughes explained, “When you go through an RFP process, you don’t have a dynamic interchange with researchers about the strengths, and challenges, and different approaches. Having people in the room talking through what they thought they could do and not do gave us a much clearer understanding of the potential universe of evaluation and research and enabled us to make better judgements as a result.”

**Feasibility was more thoroughly considered** relative to RFP approaches. Grantee participants offered critical insight into program implementation and the feasibility and usefulness of proposed evaluation approaches. A representative from one of the evaluation firms explained, “My thinking really shifted over time...The little doses of reality from the grantees themselves, and from the [support] partners... were super helpful and pretty quickly moved my thinking away from unrealistic or rigid sorts of approaches to a learning agenda.” One of the grantees shared an example of how this played out during a charrette discussion, when one evaluation team proposed sharing reports with grantees in December: “I said..., ‘That timeline actually doesn’t fit the way that we think about our work,’ and the response from the research team was like, ‘Oh my gosh, we never thought of that before. How could we adapt our timeline to make sure that this research is actually useful to grantees, rather than a report that is created for the foundation but isn’t actually influencing practice?’ It was a really easy tweak and it allowed the needs of the researcher and the practitioner to be met.”

Foundation staff agreed that grantee engagement added value not just to this process but to their **understanding of funded organizations** more broadly. Hughes explained that the charrette provided “A deeper understanding of the grantees and their capacities, a deeper understanding of the context in which grantees operate, a deeper understanding of the challenges inherent in this kind of decoupled, non-prescriptive process to some extent, and an understanding, from all of that, how you can extract some lessons that can be universally applied to other grantees and other contexts.”

The process **deepened collaboration in ways that will support implementation**. Because the charrette incentivized collaboration, a range of evaluators—including smaller firms and independent researchers—had opportunities to meaningfully contribute to and partner on evaluation designs. A representative from one of the large evaluation firms recalled, “We got to interact with each other a lot, and that set the tone moving forward...It was really valuable. The way the three sets of research questions are being integrated and coordinated [was] greatly facilitated by the charrettes. We would have never had that otherwise, which would have been a real problem.” One participant from a smaller firm also appreciated the level of collaboration, noting, “[The charrette] really allowed multiple people to bring their best thinking to the table and share that in a non-proprietary way...As a result of the Gates Foundation really incentivizing partnerships, there’s more diversity of perspective on some teams.” One of the support partners was pleased with the depth of the resulting partnerships, commenting, “With a normal RFP process, you’re going to get a lead researcher and they’re going to bring in a few different people that they know can complement what they normally do and it’s going to have a direction that’s really driven by that lead researcher. And here I think it was more collaborative, [there was] more group direction setting than an individual direction setting.”



Foundation staff also learned about how to **promote genuine partnerships** that include diverse evaluators and researchers. Sokatch recalled one of the participants raising concerns about the incentives for collaboration and subsequent conversations on this topic. He explained, “[The participant] really helped me grow my thinking in terms of what it meant to partner with minority-led organizations or other kinds of folks and the tendency to marginalize or make that a checkbox kind of thing. In the end, I was very attentive to that when I was reading proposals. And I think I only came to have that conversation—which helped educate me—through the work of the charrette.”

The process resulted in **greater consideration of equity**. The request for concepts and resulting evaluation designs elevated equity as a key issue, a result that was largely driven by charrette participants and the workshop activities and discussions. The inclusion of equity scholars as participants greatly contributed to this aspect of the charrette. One participant reflected, “While the room was largely comprised of evaluators, it also brought...people who have research interests that overlap with DEI issues, and that helped keep DEI in the conversation as opposed to an add-on or an afterthought. ...Having diverse voices in the room was super helpful.” As noted above, some participants felt that the process did not go far enough in this regard and that more work would be needed to see this aspect of the work through. The good news is that foundation staff feel that the process has made equity an even higher priority for their team and resulted in new insights on how to deepen this aspect of the NSI work.

The process **facilitated cross-learning** in ways that benefit participants. By enabling participants to learn from one another outside of a training or conference setting, the design charrette also served as a professional development and capacity building exercise. One participant explained, “It doesn’t fit neatly into the categories that I had as a professional to learn. It wasn’t a conference. It wasn’t a topical one-time expert convening. It was a sustained collaborative workspace with people I don’t really know. It was really unusual in that respect, and I valued it. If you’re a professional at this stage of your career...you’ll rarely be engaged in that kind of joint work.” Numerous participants appreciated the connections they made with one another throughout the process and the opportunity to exchange ideas and approaches. Another participant commented, “I genuinely had a good time, and it’s not very often I go into two full days of meetings and would use ‘fun’ as the adjective at the end of the day. But it was engaging, it got us thinking, we could be creative. It just felt like it opened up possibilities, rather than closed things in.” Some participants shared that they went on to use or adapt some of the facilitation techniques and creative exercises in their practice.

## **WHAT’S NEXT**

In closing, the NSI Design Charrette process experimented with a new way for funders to engage stakeholders in evaluation co-design. We believe that these kinds of participatory efforts can help shift power dynamics commonly found in philanthropy and broaden the benefit of foundation evaluations for more stakeholders. One of the most important lessons our team drew from this work is that all parties involved in the process of social change need new models of partnering with one another, greater room to experiment with new approaches, and support for the sharing of learning. We are grateful to have played a role in this effort and look forward to learning how the implementation phase of this work continues to break new ground with respect to both innovation and collaborative partnership.

# APPENDIX A: CHARRETTE PARTICIPANTS

We are grateful to the following individuals who participated in the NSI Design Charrette process, contributing their time, expertise, creativity and collaborative spirit to the success of this endeavor.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Role</b>
Noah Bookman	CORE Districts	Executive Director, CORE Data Collaborative	NSI Grantee
Tom Brock*	Community College Research Center—Teachers College, Columbia University	Director	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Jessica Calarco*	Indiana University	Assistant Professor of Sociology	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Russell Cannon	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer	Funder
Elaine Chang	LA Promise Fund	Director of Finance & Analytics	NSI Grantee
Jill Constantine*	Mathematica	Senior Vice President; Managing Director of Human Services	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Alan Coverstone	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer	Funder
Ben Daley*	High Tech High	Provost	NSI Grantee
Cecilia David	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Assistant	Funder
Kristen Davidson	University of Colorado, Boulder	Research Associate	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Fred Doolittle	MDRC	Director, K-12 Education	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Bernadette Doykos	Catalyst:Ed	Partner, Measurement, Learning, and Evaluation	Intermediary Partner
Vanja Dukic	University of Colorado, Boulder	Professor of Applied Mathematics	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Josh Edelman	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer	Funder
Stella Flores-Montgomery	New York University	Associate Dean and Associate Professor	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Tracy Fray-Oliver	Bank Street Education Center	Vice President	NSI Grantee
Beth Gamse	Gamse Partnership	Consultant	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Michael Garet*	AIR	Vice President and Institute Fellow	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Matthew Gee	BrightHive & University of Chicago	CEO / Senior Research Fellow	Data expert and panelist
Marie Gibson	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Deputy Director	Funder
Jill Hawley	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer	Funder
Erin Hellman*	Bank Street	Data & Analytics Manager	NSI Grantee
Mary Alice Heuschel	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Deputy Director	Funder
Carolyn Hill	MDRC	Senior Fellow	Researcher/evaluator/academic

Darryl Hill	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer	Funder
Bob Hughes*	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Director of K-12 Education	Funder
Travis Hurst*	Double Line	VP and Solutions Consultant	Intermediary Partner
Nathan Huttner	Redstone Strategy Group	Director and COO	Intermediary Partner
Susan Jekielek	University of Michigan ICPSR	Director, Education Archives	Data expert and panelist
Kathy King	Redstone Strategy Group	Associate Principal	Intermediary Partner
Rachel Klein	Catalyst:Ed	Partner, Measurement, Learning and Evaluation	Intermediary Partner
Julie Kochanek	American Institutes for Research	Managing Director	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Matty Lau	Center for Public Research and Leadership	Director of Research Strategy and Consulting	Intermediary Partner
Margaret Levenstein	University of Michigan ICPSR	Director	Data expert and panelist
R. L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy	New York University	Associate Professor	Researcher/evaluator/academic
David Liebowitz	University of Oregon	Assistant Professor	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Jeffrey Max	Mathematica Policy Research	Senior Researcher	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Jamie Olson McKee*	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Deputy Director, K-12 Education	Funder
David Mellor	Center for Open Science	Director of Policy Initiatives	Data expert and panelist
Ryan Mick	City Year	VP of School Design and Improvement	NSI Grantee
Jenny Nagaoka	UChicago Consortium on School Research	Deputy Director	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Jason Okonofua	University of California, Berkeley	Assistant Professor	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Lindsay Page	University of Pittsburgh	Associate Professor	Intermediary Partner
Don Perauch*	University of Michigan, School of Education	Associate Professor	Intermediary Partner
Shanette Porter	Mindset Scholars Network	Research Director	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Andrea Prado Tuma	RAND Corporation	Associate Behavioral and Social Scientist	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Eli Pristoop	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer	Funder
Alex Resch*	Mathematica Policy Research	Director of Learning and Strategy	Funder
Bryan Richardson	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer	Funder
Lashawn Richburg-Hayes*	Insight Policy Research	Vice President, Education	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Teresa Rivero	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer	Funder
Jennifer Russell	University of Pittsburgh	Associate Professor	Intermediary Partner AND NSI Grantee
Wendy Sauer	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer	Funder

Christian Schunn	University of Pittsburgh	Senior Scientist	NSI Grantee
Nathaniel Schwartz	Annenberg Institute for School Reform	Chief Research and Strategy Officer	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Jen Sherer*	Partners in Network Improvement Learning Sciences and Policy Program	University of Pittsburgh	Research Associate, Intermediary Partner
Jennifer Sloan McCombs	RAND Corporation	Senior Policy Researcher	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Andy Sokatch*	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Senior Program Officer, U.S. Program K-12 Education	Funder
Doug Staiger	Dartmouth College	Professor of Economics	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Adam Tucker*	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Deputy Director, K-12 Education	Funder
Fatih Unlu*	RAND	Senior Economist	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Ash Vasudeva*	Carnegie Foundation	Vice President, Strategic Initiatives	Researcher/evaluator/academic
Stephani Wrabel	RAND Corporation	Associate Policy Researcher	Researcher/evaluator/academic

\* Denotes individuals who participated in debrief interviews following the completion of the charrette workshops.

We are also grateful to our Engage R+D facilitation team who supported this endeavor (Clare Nolan, Michael Matsunaga, Shayla Spilker, Meghan Hunt, and Ali Miller) along with our partner Christina Garcia who co- led this work with us.

# APPENDIX B: TIPS FOR SUCCESS

So what does it take to design and manage a process like this successfully? A number of themes emerged from our follow up conversations with NSI participants, which also reflect our own team's experience and perspectives.

## Promoting inclusion requires constant attention.

When striving to engage a large group of diverse stakeholders, creating an equal playing field and promoting a sense of inclusion requires constant effort and intention. The facilitation team infused the charrette process with opportunities for participants to share their perspectives and provide feedback, beginning with the pre-charrette engagement. The addition of the equity panel in the second workshop is another example of how the facilitation team worked with the Foundation to respond to emergent issues.

Making space to hear from participants—and ensuring that they see their suggestions reflected in the process—helps build trust and set a tone of transparency and collaboration.

## Logistics matter.

Logistical considerations such as scheduling, meals, and the physical environment make a difference in how participants experience the charrette. The facilitation team encouraged participants to bring their whole selves to the process and, in partnership with foundation support staff, ensured that participants were comfortable and well taken care of throughout. Participants valued the attention to logistical aspects such as scheduling, accommodations, and extracurricular activities, noting that those elements impacted their overall experience.

## Thoughtful group norms support the process.

Establishing and enforcing thoughtful group norms fosters collaboration and productivity. The facilitation team proposed an initial set of group norms, which participants then added to. The facilitators also reviewed these norms at the top of each workshop and reinforced them throughout the series, laying important groundwork for collaboration and creating a sense of continuity across sessions.



“The care with which [the facilitation team] took what they learned from people... when they were designing all of the activities was tremendously helpful... It wouldn't have been as effective without such good facilitation and planning.”

**Adam Tucker, Gates Foundation**

“The venues were very nice and the food was excellent... You can say, ‘Oh, that doesn't count,’ but, I think it does in terms of making something like this work.”

**Evaluation firm representative**

“Right from the first day, the expectation setting was really good and very clear [and] it played out based on the expectations. You didn't get people dominating. You didn't get people coming in with their organizational hat on... I thought that worked really well, better than I would have expected.”

**Evaluation firm representative**

## Funders and grantees need space to share openly and honestly.

Everybody benefits from hearing directly from funders, grantees, and implementation partners early on in a safe and honest setting.

The Foundation's transparency and openness throughout the charrette series helped deepen participants' understanding of the initiative and what the foundation was looking for in the evaluation. It also helped potential evaluators learn more about how foundation staff themselves were held accountable and what that meant for the evaluation design in question.

Hearing directly from grantees and implementation partners helped the charrette participants conceptualize evaluation questions and designs that accounted for what the work looked like on the ground. Whereas traditional evaluations typically do not engage grantees and intermediaries until they are already underway, the charrette allowed evaluators to incorporate their perspectives during the design phase. This will likely enable the evaluations to progress quickly once they begin.

## Time constraints can boost productivity.

Under the right circumstances, introducing time constraints can push participants to do some of their best thinking. Time constraints tend to work best when participants are able to focus on their area of expertise, allowing them to quickly jump into the activity at hand.

To maximize limited time during shorter activities, it can be helpful to build in mechanisms for participants to react to and build off of one another's ideas. The research question brainwriting and design sprint activities are examples of how relatively quick activities can result in useful ideas and information.

## Dynamic activities foster creativity and collaboration.

Dynamic group processes can leverage collective expertise and foster collaboration, resulting in more feasible and rigorous evaluation designs. The charrette included a number of interactive exercises that brought participants together in different configurations and exposed them to one another's thinking at various points in the process. These activities also helped participants build and strengthen relationships with one another.



“For somebody like me, really trying to think about the evaluation aspect, [hearing from the grantees] was really critical...It was like, ‘Okay, I’m getting a sense of what this is and that it can be different for different grantees.’ That was very important for me.”

**Evaluation firm representative**

I liked the time pressures. I appreciated that we weren't given too much time to work on any of the activities. I thought that pushed [us] in a helpful direction.”

**Academic researcher**

“The fact that we mixed people up into groups and made them work together very quickly and a little bit outside of their comfort zone—in terms of guide rails, and known knowns, and known unknowns—was very productive.”

**Andy Sokatch, Gates Foundation**

## Flexibility and adaptation are key.

Adapting content based on emergent needs demonstrates responsiveness and contributes to a stronger process. The equity primer panel in the second workshop is an example of how the facilitation team identified and addressed a need that arose during the first design charrette.

However, even when charrette leaders are able to carve out time for addressing emergent topics, they may fall short of bringing participants to any kind of resolution. Equity, for example, is a highly complex issue and requires more time and depth to unpack than this process could accommodate.

## Participants need time to reflect on initial designs.

Setting time aside during the final workshop to share initial designs and solicit feedback resulted in stronger proposals. Participants valued that the charrette included a process for providing and incorporating feedback on the initial evaluation designs.

While time constraints can work well for generative activities, understanding complex proposals and thoughtfully responding to them takes substantially more time.

## Participants need space to air their fears and concerns.

It is possible—and worthwhile—to create space to raise fears and concerns in a lighthearted atmosphere. The data capacity exercise on the final day, during which participants imagined ways to create the most data burden and useless results, is a good example of how this can be done. This activity made participants feel heard and taken seriously, and provided useful information for the evaluation designs.



“This was a dynamic process and our voices were being heard. [They] cared about that and that were building the process to respond to that.”

**Implementation partner**

“We always talk about all these great ideas and then people write them up and we’re done. To bring back the ideas and say, ‘What do you think now?’ was a very powerful strategy.”

**Implementation partner**

“We had permission to not beat around the bush and go right at it. [We could say, sarcastically]: ‘This will be amazing, let’s have the evaluators produce a document that’s 500 pages long in 10-point font that no one’s ever going to read. That’s a great idea.’”

**NSI grantee**

# APPENDIX C: WORKSHOP DETAILS

## WORKSHOP 1: ANCHOR

The primary goal of the first workshop was to develop research questions that would serve as an anchor for the evaluation process. To achieve this, we set three main objectives for the first workshop: (1) set the tone for collaborative design, (2) build understanding of the NSI strategy and grantees, and (3) generate research questions. Below we discuss strategies, group activities, and techniques we used to achieve these goals, along with participant reactions.

### 1 SET THE TONE FOR COLLABORATIVE DESIGN

**Strategy: Foster collaboration through intentional activities**

#### Activity: Introductions and Norms

The first workshop began by setting the stage for the design charrette process with a focus on building rapport and helping participants get to know one another. We applied an exercise known as “3-2-1 Introductions” where participants have 5 minutes to talk with someone they don’t know, share three facts about themselves, identify two things they have in common, and one thing they could each teach the other. Rather than introducing themselves, people were invited to share their partner’s name, organization, and something interesting they learned from their conversation. People shared funny and interesting things and new connections were made with others in the same group. It turned what is often a stiff and perfunctory exercise into something warm and enjoyable.



We also shared an initial set of group norms—be your best student and teacher, embrace ambiguity and non-closure, share space, and take care of yourself and the group. The group added additional ones and agreed to a final set that we reviewed at the beginning of each workshop and throughout the series. As one grantee participant noted, “This meeting did one of the best jobs that I’ve seen of really centering the norms and ensuring that we were abiding by the norms. And that helped to create community.”

#### Technique: Seat Assignments & Rotations

To encourage participants to interact with people who they may not have otherwise, we created seating assignments for each workshop day, rotating people from different backgrounds in terms of expertise, role, race/ethnicity, and gender. One implementation partner commented, “I liked how they mixed people up intentionally, and the way that we moved through different kinds of activities to engage people. It wasn’t just a typical ‘turn and talk, now report out.’” This approach was particularly important for independent researchers who were less accustomed to these types of collaborative meetings as well as ensuring that foundation staff interacted with a variety of participants as opposed to those they knew well.

#### Technique: Social Time

Outside of the workshops, the foundation organized additional activities for participants to socialize in more relaxed atmospheres, including dinners and happy hours. One grantee shared, “The first night I attended the happy hour, and that was a nice informal relational-focused opportunity to get to know people. On the first day, I was walking into the room with a little bit of a grounding around who some of the faces might be.” These informal interactions helped participants connect with one another on a more personal level, mitigating a sense of competition as well as perceived power differentials.



## 2 BUILD UNDERSTANDING OF THE NSI STRATEGY AND GRANTEES

**Strategy: Provide foundation staff and grantees space to share openly and honestly**

### Activity: Foundation Fireside Chat

During the Fireside Chat, Director Bob Hughes and Deputy Director Jamie McKee provided an overview of the NSI work to date—the need it was designed to address, driving assumptions behind the strategy, perspectives on implementation, and decisions the evaluation would inform. Foundation leaders responded to key questions that were sourced during the pre-meeting stakeholder engagement process, as well as questions that were generated live during facilitated Q&A.



The Foundation’s transparency and openness—not just during this activity but throughout the entire charrette series—helped deepen participants’ understanding of the initiative and what the Foundation was looking for in the evaluation. As one participant from an evaluation firm noted, “Folks from the Gates Foundation provided really honest, frank, and useful information about the initiative, and what their expectations are from the evaluation.” Foundation leaders acknowledged that at times this level of openness was new and different for them and resulted in some feelings of discomfort and vulnerability. Despite this, staff recognized the value of candor in their communications with charrette participants.

### Exercise: World Café

We used a World Café activity to deepen participants’ understanding of what NSI implementation looked like in practice and build an appreciation for the grantee experience. Participants rotated between four breakout sessions, each of which was led by a pair of grantees or NSI support partners. Grantees and partners gave a brief presentation of their work and then responded to open questions focused on things such as programmatic implementation, how grantees thought about student and program success, and what they were interested in learning. For the evaluators and academics in the room, the opportunity to hear directly from grantees and NSI support partners was critical to understanding how the strategy was playing out on the ground and the kinds of data and information that could be useful.

## 3 GENERATE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**Strategy: Maximize participation and innovation with brainstorming and brainwriting**

### Exercise: Quiet Brainstorming

By the afternoon of the first day, participants had spent time getting to know who was in the room, hearing from foundation staff about evaluation needs and expectations, and learning from grantees and partners about the work taking place on the ground. Their minds were filled with new information and understandings about the NSI work, along with ideas about questions that might be important to ask in order to assess progress and impact. At the end of the day, we invited participants to spend 10 silent minutes writing down as many potential questions as they could in a Google form document.



This brief, 10-minute exercise resulted in a total of 267 questions. It also revealed some misunderstandings about how the NSI work is structured and what language might need further clarification in order for participants to do their best work. Following this exercise, our team spent time that evening clustering the questions into categories and developing a visual to further explicate the initiative structure and approach. Overall, the visual we developed turned out to play an important organizing framework for the evaluation discussion as it clearly identified different actors involved in the NSI work and what their role was in terms of helping to contribute to positive outcomes.

## Exercise: Research Question Brainwriting

After we had presented and discussed the visual, we engaged participants in brainwriting, brainstorming's lesser known cousin. During typical group brainstorming sessions, often only a few ideas get discussed and discussion can be dominated by those who are more comfortable in group settings. The idea behind Brainwriting is to have 6 participants write down 3 ideas on a worksheet in a 5-minute time period. After each participant takes a turn jotting down the 3 ideas, they pass the worksheet on to the person next to them to either contribute to the existing idea or start a new one. Since worksheets are passed and shared, people can learn from other's ideas and many ideas get generated in a short amount of time from everyone. It also allows all participants to contribute ideas, including those who tend to be quiet in group situations.

The goal was to develop a refined set of research questions and ideas for the Foundation to consider and further prioritize. In small groups of 6, participants addressed a focus area of choice from the NSI visual presented that morning and then rotated to a second area. Following the activity, participants highlighted their best question from each focus area on the wall for the large group to browse. Participants selected their favorites using post-it notes. The time constraint was an important and intentional element of these activities. One implementation partner observed, "There wasn't a 45-minute discussion with someone charting. It was a very intense, thoughtful process that got a lot of people's ideas and a lot of thinking down in areas where they knew or cared a lot about. Those sorts of activities were really productive." Indeed, charrette participants were able to prioritize 78 of the original 267 research questions. The foundation distilled these into 6 sharply articulated topline inquiry areas to guide evaluation efforts (see box).

## TOPLINE RESEARCH QUESTIONS FROM CHARRETTE PROCESS

**Networks.** What makes for an effective network across diverse contexts, and how do networks evolve over time in support of school-led improvement efforts for Black, Latinx and low-income students?

**Continuous Improvement.** What makes for an effective continuous improvement approach in support of Black, Latinx and low-income students? How do continuous improvement approaches vary in response to: (a) the nature of problems being addressed (i.e. operational, pedagogic, etc.), (b) who is involved (i.e., educators, staff, students, parents), (c) school context (i.e., leadership, data infrastructure, accountability), and (d) maturation of implementation over time?

**Intermediaries.** What makes for an effective intermediary, and what roles do they play in supporting networks and school-led improvement efforts for Black, Latinx and low-income students?

**Outcomes.** What is the potential causal impact of effective networks and intermediaries on outcomes for Black, Latinx and low-income students? What conditions might mediate or moderate those impacts, and what are the implications for future school improvement efforts?

**Schools.** To what extent do continuous improvement approaches catalyze broader changes in schools and broader school systems (i.e., funding, policy, governance at district/charter management organization, local/state/federal levels) in support of Black, Latinx and low-income students? What conditions might mediate or moderate broader changes, and what are the implications for future school improvement efforts?

**Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI).** How are intermediaries building equity and race into their work and to what extent is this contributing to more effective school-led improvement efforts?

The primary goal of the second workshop was to develop sketches of evaluation designs in response to the questions developed at the first meeting, and later prioritized by foundation staff. In order to move to that step, we needed to spend time digging deeper into two topics—how equity was showing up in the work and what kinds of data sources would be feasible in the context of grantees’ work.

### 1 DIG DEEPER INTO EQUITY

**Strategy: Build and deepen understanding of equity and inclusion**

#### Activity: Equity primer panel

During the first charrette, a small cluster of participants—many of whom offer expertise and/or lived experience with educational equity issues—gathered informally to share questions and impressions with one another. Our facilitation team noticed this gathering and did some follow-up checking in with participants to learn more. Participants had questions, and potentially criticisms, about how equity was showing up in the work and desired deeper discussion on these issues. One individual also expressed fatigue with people of color having to bear the burden of raising this in the large group, an indicator perhaps that our facilitation had not situated equity strongly to be at stake for everyone in the room.



Our facilitation team recognized the opportunity to play an active role in raising these issues directly. It quickly became clear that participants brought varying levels of knowledge and experience with diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). While some were deeply immersed in the latest scholarship and thinking on these issues, others were newer to these issues and exhibited some resistance to the ideas being raised. Our team realized we needed to shine a brighter light on equity and help “level-set” the group’s knowledge.

Building on the trust we had established with the foundation, our facilitation team led the conceptualization and planning of an equity panel for workshop two. Specifically, we tapped into and lifted up the equity expertise among participants, attended the NSI Community of Practice to hear more about how grantees were integrating equity, and included an NSI grantee in the panel. The goal of the panel was twofold: 1) to broaden participants’ understanding of how racial equity issues show up in schools, and (2) to provide a better sense of how networks are approaching this, with an eye toward implications for evaluation.

Charrette participants entered the equity conversation from different places and perspectives, which was both a strength and a challenge. While they all appreciated the inclusion of the equity panel, they experienced it differently based on their previous background on this topic. For example, one researcher characterized the panel as “eye-opening.” For others, the panel lifted up issues with which they were already familiar. Despite variations in individual experience, the panel helped some participants to “catch up” to others and enabled deeper consideration of these issues in the development of evaluation designs.

#### Technique: Intentional Warm-Up

People can have different feelings and experiences entering into equity-related conversations. Some are excited to dig into the topic, others are worried they might say the wrong thing, while others may be carrying heavy emotions stemming from personal experience. Making room for people to anticipate what challenges or emotions might come up for them and reflect on how they want to show up in advance can be helpful. To facilitate this, we opened the workshop with a warm-up exercise where people connected in pairs around the following prompts: (1) What did you most enjoy about workshop 1? (2) What parts of workshop 2 might be hard for you? and (3) What do you hope to give and get during today’s discussion? This provided space for both self-reflection and listening in ways that were helpful for panel-related discussions.

## 2 PRIORITIZE DATA SOURCES

**Strategy: Maximize creativity by removing parameters**

### Exercise: Data wish lists

From the very beginning of the charrette process, participants expressed a strong desire to understand what data was being collected and could be leveraged for evaluation purposes. We actively resisted calls for more information on this topic wanting to build designs from the ground up with a more thorough appreciation of what data might be both possible and feasible. In order to get people thinking more creatively and openly about data possibilities, we began this exercise with a song (Lucky Star by Madonna) and a quote from the children’s poem “Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might have the data I wish tonight.”



After some laughter and a small bit of dancing, we introduced the idea of a “data wish list,” or the ideal data sources one would like to address key research topics. Participants worked in teams to generate a data wish list for one of the topline research questions, identifying both sources and methods. After 15 minutes, the groups rotated to a new research topic area, reviewing and adding to the data wish list started by the previous group. Participants then received additional information about the feasibility of the sources and methods in the data wish list. The following day, they were assigned to new teams to review one of the wish list topic areas, assess how realistic each data source was, and address what it would take to effectively obtain the data. This crowd-sourcing approach took advantage of the range of expertise in the room. One participant reflected, “Part of the exercise was to think about how intrusive or difficult the data would be to obtain. It was useful to get a brain dump from everyone in the room, because then you get different perspectives about things.” This is an example of how the charrette encouraged creative thinking and leveraged the collective and wide-ranging expertise of those in the room.

## 3 DEVELOP DESIGN SKETCHES

**Strategy: Fast-paced activities foster creativity and collaboration**

### Exercise: Design sprint

A design sprint is a method for solving complex problems using design thinking techniques such as interdisciplinary collaboration, rapid prototyping, and usability testing. We adapted this approach to support the development of evaluation design prototypes in response to the topline evaluation questions. Drawing on work completed to date, small teams sketched design plans for assigned topic areas, including key questions, anticipated learning contribution, approach, timeline, data sources, expertise, and budget. Two members from each team rotated to a new group halfway through the process to contribute a fresh perspective and reinforce open collaboration over attachment to particular topic areas. The exercise culminated in a gallery walk showing the design sketch for each topic area. Participants were encouraged to provide usability feedback as they reviewed the sketches that emerged from this process. Many participants felt that this type of “forced collaboration” was one of the most valuable features of the design charrette series, and expressed surprise at how quickly groups were able to formulate responsive designs that built on conversations to date.



Following the workshop, the foundation planned to review all nine of the resulting sketches, looking for opportunities to streamline and integrate elements as appropriate. Following this, the Foundation would issue a request for concept memos in response to select designs. All charrette participants were invited to submit concept memos, knowing that the process was competitive and only one design would be selected for further vetting in workshop three and potential funding at a later date. Participants were encouraged to form teams—with other charrette participants or parties outside this process—as they saw fit. To facilitate this, we closed workshop two with a networking session that included fun beverages and snacks, stickers to indicate one’s topical interest areas, and networking prompts to support teaming. While this point in the process necessarily introduced new competitive undertones, this exercise helped to maintain connection, openness, and collaboration as we headed into the third and final charrette workshop.

## WORKSHOP 3: PRESSURE-TEST

Following workshop 2, the foundation issued requests for three concept memos focused on: (1) intermediaries and networks, (2) continuous improvement in schools, and (3) student outcomes. Questions related to DEI were posed up front for application across all three of these focus areas. The foundation received six concept memos total, five of which corresponded to the three topic areas, and a sixth which proposed an alternative study. After reviewing all six carefully, the foundation selected three concepts for further vetting and potential funding. The primary goals of the third workshop were to gather feedback on these concepts from a broader set of charrette participants (including newly invited grantees and staff) and to generate ideas for ongoing collaboration in ways that benefit this work.

### 1 PRESSURE-TEST DESIGNS

**Strategy: Listening and closing the feedback loop supports responsive approaches**

#### **Exercise: World Café**

In this session, participants broke into groups and rotated through each of the three concept team stations, world café style. Concept teams provided a high-level overview of their proposal and the key elements, and the remaining participants provided feedback on the proposal, asking questions and offering suggestions on how to further clarify an approach or improve the proposed process. Participants were explicitly encouraged to think about the extent to which grantee use and burden, along with equity and rigor, were considered in the design approach. Participants valued that the charrette included a process for providing and incorporating feedback on the initial evaluation designs. An implementation partner shared, “Having that be the focus of the third charrette was great. I don’t know that that happens very often.”



Concept teams were also encouraged to use a “constructive listening approach” that involves listening without commenting to either affirm or defend feedback. They were also responsible for capturing ideas and tracking suggestions to share back with the large group. One of the participants who submitted a concept recalled, “The people in the room were supposed to talk and we couldn’t say anything. And it was very hard to avoid [responding], but we got lots of good information about how to revise the proposals.” Each research team then had a working session to dig into the issues raised by participants and to propose refinements to their approach. They then presented this back to the full group, affirming not just what they heard but what they would be doing in response to the feedback provided.

## 2 DIG INTO COLLABORATION

Strategy: Focusing on what you don't want can make things more discussable

### Exercise: Triz

While much care had been taken throughout the charrette process to consider data burden and utility, there was an opportunity to reconsider these issues with an even larger number of participants given the additional grantees and staff invited to this workshop. The goal of this session was to identify and avoid unwanted results using an exercise known as “Triz.” While the concept teams gathered to review feedback from participants, the remainder of the group were asked to imagine ways to create the most data burden and useless results for NSI grantees, evaluators, and the foundation. They then indicated if any of these activities were currently happening and listed next steps for avoiding these negative outcomes.



Participants felt this was a powerful exercise that allowed them to raise serious concerns in a lighthearted atmosphere. One grantee explained that it “let people let off a little bit of steam, and really air some of the fears they were feeling around the process... Some of it felt a little fun and light and silly, and then some of it felt really serious and like something that needed to be put into the room to make sure that we were keeping these unintended consequences front-of-mind.” Similarly, one of the implementation partners shared, “It was really fun. It was hilarious. And I was surprised by how much clearer my own thinking got... Because it’s this playful exercise, I got to just say [my worst-case scenario] exactly how I actually think it.”

One of the independent academics reflected on what made this exercise so effective, and noted, “It generated a lot of risks that could serve as critical commentary on how people were approaching their own projects. It was a device that, within the norms generated in the room, created a really nice critical space where you could really ask hard to ask questions, but in the context of an intentionally designed task. I thought that was very clever, really well done. Just a real highlight for me, and I’ve actually sort of appropriated it.” This activity made participants feel heard and taken seriously, while providing useful information for the evaluation teams.

## 3 REFLECT ON THE CHARRETTE

Strategy: Reflect and celebrate to provide closure

### Activity: Group Reflections

Providing closure is a really important part of large group convenings. Our facilitation team applied several activities to remind participants of the original intent of this process, to develop a collective sense of what was accomplished, and to ensure clarity of next steps. We began with the experience of participants themselves, inviting them to complete a survey about their experiences that riffed off *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* by Dr. Seuss. Participants were asked to complete statements about their charrette experience—what they felt like when they started the charrette journey, what they learned along the way, what was hard, and what advice they’d provide to others on such a journey. Our team shared back responses. For example, whereas people entered this process with a mix of *uncertainty, ambiguity and hopefulness*, they completed it feeling *optimistic, encouraged, and excited*. Building on these sentiments, foundation leaders shared their own learnings from this effort, reflected on how the collaboration that took place during this effort could be carried into the implementation of NSI work moving forward, and spoke to the foundation’s next steps following this effort. We closed the day with a celebration of the good work that had been accomplished and the relationships that had been developed through this effort.

