LESSONS AND INSIGHTS FROM THE GREATER TWIN CITIES UNITED WAY'S
SOCIAL INNOVATION FUND GRANT

United Way

**Greater Twin Cities
United Way**

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The Social Innovation Fund (SIF) was a program of the U.S. Government's Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) that received federal funding from 2010 to 2016 to identify, validate, and grow innovative, promising solutions to challenges faced by local communities while also strengthening the nonprofit sector's capacities. Through a competitive application process, CNCS awarded SIF grants to intermediary organizations—experienced grantmaking institutions with strong skills, infrastructure, and records of success in selecting, validating, and growing high-performing programs that serve low-income communities. The intermediaries, which matched the federal funds dollar for dollar, held open competitions to identify community-based organizations that operated innovative programs with evidence of success. The intermediaries subgranted at least 80 percent of the federal and matched funds to these nonprofits, which were required to match the funds they received and participate in rigorous evaluations of their programs. Although CNCS awarded its last SIF grants in FY2016, the intermediaries continued to administer their subgrants until the end of the awarded grant period.

Greater Twin Cities United Way was the first Twin Cities-based intermediary to receive a Social Innovation Fund Grant directly. In 2012, GTCUW, in partnership with a newly created organization, Generation Next, became the intermediary for a $5 million, five-year SIF grant intended to improve educational outcomes for 1,500 to 2,000 low-income children and youth annually. Project planners were motivated by opportunities to address economic and racial disparities in outcomes, scale good programs and build evidence of their effectiveness, as well as support the collective impact model exemplified by Generation Next.

Greater Twin Cities United Way partners with local nonprofits, businesses, government, and social service agencies in nine counties that include Minneapolis, St. Paul, and the surrounding areas. With more than 100 years of history in the Twin Cities, GTCUW currently invests in 323 programs at 173 nonprofit partner agencies to strengthen safety net, education, and jobs for people living in or near poverty.

Generation Next was created in 2012 to serve as the Minneapolis-St. Paul affiliate of StriveTogether, a national network of about 70 Cradle to Career Network partnerships working to improve educational outcomes through cross-sector efforts that pursue a shared community vision. Generation Next is a coalition of civic, business, and education leaders dedicated to closing achievement and opportunity gaps by using rigorous data analysis and community engagement to identify what works and replicate the most promising practices. In many ways the SIF grant, which came just as Generation Next was formed, served as the new organization's launchpad.

The SIF grant aligned strategies and resources around five cradle-to-career targets pursued by Generation Next: kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading proficiency, eighth-grade math proficiency, high school graduation, and post-secondary credential attainment. GTCUW, with Generation Next, awarded subgrants to six child- and youth-serving nonprofits in the Twin Cities to support programs addressing one or more of the cradle-to-career goals. (See descriptions in box on next page). All six subgrantees were already operating their programs in some form, so participation in SIF offered an opportunity for them to scale up and build evidence of their effectiveness.

This learning brief presents insights from the SIF grant that GTCUW and Generation Next managed, which leaders of nonprofit organizations, school districts, government agencies, philanthropies, evaluation firms, and intermediary organizations may wish to consider as they contemplate future social-change efforts. Our focus is on high-level, broadly relevant lessons about the value added by the five-year grant and the challenges encountered—rather than review all of the grant's results, which are documented in evaluation reports. The information provided here comes from interviews with collaborators from the subgrantee organizations, GTCUW, Generation Next, and a review of SIF documents.

SIF STATISTICS

$14M
in federal and leveraged private grants

Served an average of almost
10,000 kids per year

4,300
career-oriented internships, generated over $12 M in wages

867
Minneapolis–Saint Paul high school graduates completed college degrees

1,606
prek-1st graders improved vocabulary skills

1,328
children improved academic skills through home visiting

278
Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood students improved reading skills

SUBGRANTEES AND PROGRAMS

GTCUW and Generation Next selected the following subgrantees because they operated replicable, evidence-based programs aligned with Generation Next's goal areas.

ACHIEVE MPLS

a strategic nonprofit that partners with the Minneapolis Public Schools to inspire and equip Minneapolis students for careers, college, and life, used its subgrant to expand the STEP-UP Achieve program to 200 additional at-risk Minneapolis high school students. STEP-UP Achieve provides intensive skills training through high-quality, paid summer internships at local businesses.

SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOUNDATION (SPPSF)

was an organization whose programs and grantmaking sought to improve teaching and learning in the classroom. (SPPSF was dissolved in July 2016.) This SIF subgrant aimed to improve proficiency in third-grade reading and eighth-grade math by strengthening and expanding the Tutoring Partnership for Academic Excellence, a program that provided intensive technical assistance and training to academic support programs so that they could accelerate outcomes for at-risk youth.

SERVEMINNESOTA

the state's administrator for federal AmeriCorps funds, provides grants, training, technical assistance, and compliance monitoring to nonprofit organizations that have been selected to run an AmeriCorps program. ServeMinnesota's SIF subgrant addressed third-grade reading proficiency by piloting and scaling up the Minnesota Assessment of Vocabulary for Reading Improvement and Comprehension (MAVRIC), an intervention delivered through the Minnesota Reading Corps literacy model, designed to help low-income students in pre-kindergarten through third grade acquire more of the vocabulary needed for reading proficiency and comprehension.

COLLEGE POSSIBLE

an organization that helps low-income high school students get into college, stay enrolled, and complete their college education, used its SIF subgrant to expand and evaluate the college coaching program being implemented at six post-secondary institutions in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area.

WAY TO GROW

a nonprofit focused on early childhood education, used its subgrant to expand access to the Great by 8 intensive home visiting model, an integrated family-school-community approach to improving academic achievement of children in low-income families, aged three through third grade. Way to Grow is a two-generation approach that cultivates parenting skills and access to resources while also providing academic supports and targeting children's healthy development.

THE SAINT PAUL PROMISE NEIGHBORHOOD

(SPPN) is an education partnership that puts children in the Frogtown, Rondo, and Summit-University neighborhoods of Saint Paul on the pathway to college and career success. It used the SIF subgrant to improve kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading proficiency in the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood. SPPN partnered with the Network for the Development of Children of African Descent (NdCAD), a non-profit family education center in Saint Paul, to implement the Sankofa reading program at its partner schools. During the first two years of the SIF grant, SPPN also worked with the University of Minnesota to adapt the Incredible Years parenting program to the Hmong and African American populations.

STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES
PILLAR 1 OF SIF

Intermediaries can take many different forms and play a variety of roles. To strengthen the nonprofit field, CNCS framed the SIF as a way to reinforce intermediary roles in addressing community challenges. For the Twin Cities United Way SIF grant, the intermediary function was performed through a partnership between GTCUW and Generation Next.   Drawing on each organization's strengths, this "intermediary partnership" provided subgrantees with many resources, including:

- **Strategy**: GTCUW staff created a strategy for what the federal grant and matching dollars would achieve, which aligned the SIF plan and resources with Generation Next's cradle-to-career goals. The strategy established a framework that was intended to help subgrantees understand how their discrete programs were part of a broader endeavor and to show other local leaders how the SIF fit into a larger context.

- **Technical Assistance**: Intermediary staff leveraged their own knowledge and contacts to connect subgrantees with information and guidance on ways to strengthen their organizational, program and evaluation capacities. Intermediary staff also used their connections to help subgrantees obtain, review, and analyze school district data on the students served through the SIF-funded programs. Through contracts with the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) and Child Trends, the intermediary partnership provided subgrantees with technical assistance and support on their SIF-mandated evaluations.

- **Learning Opportunities**: Subgrantee representatives participated in a series of "action networks" convened by Generation Next to discuss challenges and solutions related to the cradle-to-career goals, which brought them in contact with colleagues outside the SIF grant. GTCUW staff also convened subgrantee leaders periodically, as a SIF-only cohort, to discuss the evaluations and other topics related to the grant.

- **Funding**: A portion of Generation Next's funding served as the required matching grant at the intermediary level.

The intermediary role added value and improved outcomes in many ways. Serving as GTCUW's partner helped to launch Generation Next, giving the new organization a well-defined initial project, instant connections to community programs, and legitimacy in the eyes of local nonprofit leaders and funders. A strong relationship developed between the Generation Next team and United Way's SIF and education staff; the two organizations' staff met frequently to discuss SIF subgrantees, which led to more communication on topics beyond the grant.

According to evaluation reports, technical assistance provided by the intermediary partnership improved nonprofits' organizational capacities by exposing participants to the latest best practices in evaluation, community partnership, grants management and compliance, and program development. This left subgrantees better able to improve and assess their own programs and better positioned to obtain and manage federal grants in the future. It also increased the quality and quantity of services for students served by the nonprofits (see examples on next page).

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[1] For a menu of potential characteristics of intermediaries, see Smarter Relationships, Better Results by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2013.

SUPPORT FROM THE INTERMEDIARY IMPROVED PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

With help from the intermediary partnership, ServeMinnesota engaged consultants to review its early literacy materials through an inclusivity lens. That led to the realization that what program leaders thought was culturally agnostic material actually reflected biases. ServeMinnesota reworked the materials to be more inclusive. Attention to inclusivity now "is baked into what we do," says David Parker, the organization's vice president of research and development—and the revamped materials are widely used throughout the Reading Corps model:

> We had gotten comfortable with the internal and external narrative about how Reading Corps helps build foundational skills. [Yet we knew the program had room to grow with respect] to how people of different ethnicities, speaking different languages, experienced our program. SIF gave us examples of our unconscious bias, such as how we select books for the program; the books weren't sufficiently culturally sensitive or representative. That pushed us to grow immeasurably.

Today, the books used in ServeMinnesota's MAVRIC program are predominantly written by and about people of color: 66 percent African or African American, 5 percent Asian/Pacific American, 5 percent American Indian/ First Nations, and 3 percent Latino. Only 21 percent are written by and about Whites (compared with 75 percent in the typical program).

After reading several quarterly reports indicating that frequent staff turnover was undermining STEP-UP Achieve outcomes, a member of the intermediary staff asked AchieveMpls staff how they planned to address the problem. AchieveMpls leaders created a new cross-training process, developed training manuals, gave program staff extra guidance on how to align internships with other parts of the program, and split work readiness training into two days so program staff could consider internship placements more carefully. "Those practices will remain after SIF," observes Lauren Bloem, the nonprofit's manager of monitoring and evaluation.

When intermediary staff reviewed information on St. Paul Promise Neighborhood's Sankofa program, to understand why preliminary evaluation data did not show dramatic improvement in literacy outcomes, they found that about a third of participants were proficient readers at the time of enrollment. Although these children were gaining cultural exposure, there was little room to improve their already-strong reading skills. With encouragement from intermediary partners, program staff began working with the host schools to recruit more students with literacy needs.

DESPITE MANY STRENGTHS, THE INTERMEDIARY ROLE ALSO INVOLVED CHALLENGES, INCLUDING:

- **Communication**: Intermediary staff acknowledge challenges in clear communication with subgrantees about their roles or with local system leaders about the big picture—such as the overarching strategy behind the SIF subgrants or the importance of leveraging the programs' successes systemwide. At times, the communication gaps caused confusion about roles, limited awareness of the grant's achievements among people not directly involved, and produced uncertainty about how SIF-generated knowledge might be applied more broadly.

- **Stakeholder engagement**: CNCS' fast timeline for implementation limited intermediary partners' time and space for community engagement and co-design. Consequently, opportunities were missed to engage the school systems early in the planning process, which diminished the chance that SIF-funded programs would become institutionalized. Subgrantees also felt that people of color were insufficiently represented in planning and implementation. CNCS' own review of the SIF nationally found that most intermediaries struggled with "communicating the complex project to internal and external stakeholders and sustaining funder, partner, and staff energy and commitment over the five-year…grant period" (Stiefvater & Education Northwest 2015).

LESSONS ABOUT STRENGTHENING THE INTERMEDIARY ROLE

1. Defining and communicating about roles and expectations is important, especially when the intermediary function involves a partnership. Takeaways:

   - Having clear, written goals and expectations from the beginning of a partnership helps to align expectations and prevent confusion. These shared commitments should be communicated through partnership agreements, written guidance to subgrantees, and ongoing conversations with partners and subgrantees.

   - Committing to a shared workplan that includes plans for communicating about the project may help intermediary partners keep communication front and center when other priorities command attention.

   - Ideally, communication is multidirectional: The intermediary partners and subgrantees all share information about their expectations, strengths, and concerns with each other.

> **" We set ourselves up for failure far more often than success when we're not clear about what we want to do. "**
>
> ~Michelle Walker, Generation Next

2. Including people from impacted communities in decision-making is a must. Takeaways:

   - Allocate time and financial support for involving the participation of community members, not just nonprofit leaders, in designing programs.

   - Authentic community engagement structures and processes are based on a clear sense of what it means to be "community-led" or "community influenced." Before convening people, think about whether systems and resources are in place to ensure community members have opportunities to engage from a position of power, not just as a source of feedback on others' decisions.

   - Think about positioning the intermediary as a conduit for accessing big dollars that can then be co-designed with community knowledge.

3. Purposeful technical assistance is one of the most useful services an intermediary can provide for grantees seeking to improve, expand, evaluate, and sustain programs. Takeaways:

   - Ideally, the intermediary will assess needs and co-develop technical assistance alongside grantees. If that isn't possible due to grant constraints, it is especially important to be clear, from the beginning, about how technical assistance needs will be determined and delivered.

   - Technical assistance is most effective when it aligns with the subgrantees' cultural priorities and capacity needs. One way to ensure this is to present a menu of technical assistance providers and allow subgrantees to choose the options that best fit their needs.

   - Consider prioritizing technical assistance that focuses on high-need but under-resourced topics, such as cultural competency, inclusiveness, and equity as well as evaluation methodology, data collection, and analysis.

IMPACT EVALUATION PRODUCED A RANGE OF FINDINGS AND EVIDENCE

- Achieve MPLS' **Step-up** program demonstrated moderate evidence of a positive effect on students being on track to graduate in four years and improve job-related skills, knowledge, and comfort in the workplace. The evaluation did not find moderate evidence of positive effects on academic or behavioral outcomes or post-secondary enrollment, but the STEP-UP program does not specifically target school-related skills such as these, so it may be unrealistic to expect any impact on them.

- Students who began the **College Possible** program in 2013 graduated from college at a higher rate by the end of four years than a group of comparison students. There was no statistically significant difference measured in average cumulative GPA, credits earned, or retention rates for participants compared with nonparticipants.

- Students participating in the SPPSF **Tutoring Partnership** had significantly greater gains than a control group during the year they were tutored; this was true for low-income and higher-income students and for students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. The programs maintained moderate levels of quality, and tutoring staff found the partnership's services beneficial. However, limitations in sample sizes and demographics prevented evaluators from determining which tutoring strategy was most effective.

- ServeMinnesota's **Minnesota Assessment of Vocabulary for Reading Improvement and Comprehension (MAVRIC)** successfully trained tutors to administer assessments and deliver interventions. Descriptive results from several schools produced evidence that students receiving MAVRIC made greater gains than students who did not. However, a non-randomized impact evaluation conducted in MAVRIC's second year produced equivocal results. A randomized study in MAVRIC's fourth year indicated that all students, including those in the treatment and control groups, made comparable gains, which led to a finding of no statistically significant impact. Evaluators caution that their ability to capture impact was limited by (a) standardized measures of change that did not reflect the intervention closely enough; (b) situations in which students did not receive the full amount of intervention; and (c) other factors, such as the small size of tutoring groups, students' multiple risk factors, and tutors' ability to manage student behavior.

- Way to Grow's **Great by 8** participants scored significantly higher than comparison students in third-grade reading proficiency. Evaluators also found a small but significant increase in child immunization, dental care, and wellness care. At least 70% of surveyed parents reported learning a lot from the home visits and finding the topics very useful; evaluators did not find statistically significant changes in parent involvement, but they noted that already-high levels of involvement left little room for growth. Results showed no statistically significant difference in total literacy scores for kindergarten participants compared with a control group.

- Ninety percent of Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood's **Sankofa** program participants improved by at least one level on a standardized reading assessment, 80 percent of parents reported an increase in their children's positive behaviors or attitudes, and parents and staff reported a positive reaction to Sankofa's African-centered approach. Pre- and post-participation assessments found no statistically significant change in one element of reading performance, letter words and sight words; however, evaluators noted that this portion of the evaluation was missing a substantial amount of data.

ESTABLISHING EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH RIGOROUS EVALUATION
PILLAR 2 OF SIF

The Corporation for National and Community Service hardwired evaluation into the SIF grant by requiring subgrantees to demonstrate some evidence of effectiveness when selected and then conduct a rigorous evaluation during the course of the grant. The evaluations of GTCUW - Generation Next SIF subgrantee programs produced a wide range of results. As the box on p. 7 illustrates, some results and evidence were more conclusive than others. Overall, subgrantees were able to demonstrate progress on some but not all outcomes measured.

> ❝ *We are in a much better position to understand what it's going to take to grow after having participated in the evaluation.* ❞
>
> ~Jeff Knudsen, College Possible

Subgrantees said that participating in the evaluation process added value to their organizations even when no statistically significant programmatic impact was found. The demands of rigorous evaluation served as guidelines that helped program staff stay focused, disciplined, and receptive to feedback. As Generation Next, GTCUW, and technical assistance providers shared evaluation methods, research, and data with subgrantees, nonprofit leaders improved the rigor of their evaluations and the level of evidence supporting their programs. Nonprofit staff gained a belief that evaluation could be used to improve programs, and tools and skills for doing so, including: program theory and logic models; sampling strategies; experimental, quasi-experimental, and pre-experimental evaluation designs. Some subgrantee staff also became more comfortable taking the risks needed to evolve their programs or organizations. "Being comfortable with the unknown was a helpful thing for us to learn," one subgrantee told an evaluator.

Although SIF's evaluation requirement provided necessary structure and generated useful information, it also posed challenges for the intermediary and subgrantees, involving:

- **Expectations**: The impact evaluations were not designed for rapid-cycle improvement, because the required evaluation methods involved longer-term measures. But some stakeholders still expected early results to provide guidance on which programs and practices were effective. Those stakeholders were disappointed or took the lack of rapid-cycle feedback as a sign of failure. "It was frustrating to try to answer questions about…where to spend significant resources when the evaluation was not giving the answers," a subgrantee said.

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[2] SIF measured evidence on a continuum from preliminary to moderate to strong. All funded programs were expected to achieve moderate or strong evidence of impact by the end of the grant. CNCS required each subgrantee to develop an impact evaluation plan that specified: a theory for what the program would accomplish and how changes would be achieved; the evaluation approach; and the sampling method, outcomes, measures, and data activities. GTCUW staff and independent evaluators helped subgrantees develop their plans and get through the CNCS approval and revision process, collect and analyze data, and use findings to make programmatic improvements. The evaluators also conducted implementation evaluations of the subgrantees' SIF programs and the GTCUW/Generation Next partnership. For more on SIF evaluation requirements, see https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/resource/GP_SIF_Evaluation_Reporting_Gudiance_0.pdf.

> **" *We had more latitude than we realized. Had we understood, we probably would have engaged more key partners, chosen different measures, or tried to come up with our own measures.* "**
>
> ~Naomi Zuk-Fisher, Greater Twin Cities United Way

- **Evaluation design**: Some organizations felt pressured to use SIF's "rigid" framework (e.g., randomized-control or matched-comparison evaluations) to create an evidence base that would assure funders their investment was likely to yield success—even when those models didn't fit well with their organizations or program design. Others worried that traditional statistical models weren't culturally relevant for programs serving high-poverty communities of color. Some program staff found it hard to know what to measure, given the multilayered nature of their work. Others struggled to find meaningful metrics, either because existing measures didn't capture their program's effects or better tools cost too much. In retrospect, intermediary staff say these challenges underscore the importance of engaging community stakeholders in the evaluation design and talking about it in ways that resonate with the community, right from the start.

- **Capacity for evaluation**: All participants, including intermediary partners, underestimated the time, cost, and staff resources involved in evaluation. The evaluations were complicated and expensive, with both factors rising in relation to the strength of evidence sought. The SIF grant's five-year timeframe seemed generous compared to other grants, but the outcomes subgrantees sought often required more than five years to appear. Consequently, some programs could not capture their ultimate outcomes or had to use indirect measures that were poorly matched to the interventions.

- **Tensions between innovation, evaluation, and scale**: Innovation and scaling both involve periods of uncertainty, raising concerns that what gets evaluated is not the program's impact but its growing pains. In later years, CNCS explicitly advised subgrantees not to attempt innovation, evaluation, and scale simultaneously.

- **Communication**: Subgrantees were sensitive about having their communities objectified. "How do we talk about evaluation so that families don't feel like a science experiment?" a program leader asked.

Many of these challenges are inherent in any evaluation—especially of programs that seek long-term outcomes or social change, which is notoriously hard to measure by traditional methods. Despite the challenges, subgrantees were committed both to doing evaluation well and to using results to improve their programming.
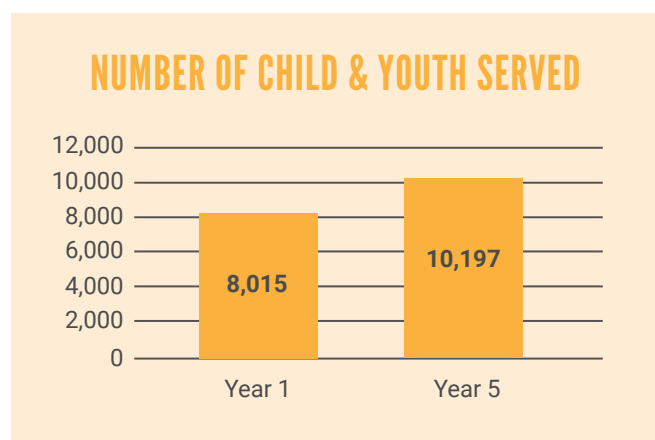
LESSONS ABOUT EVIDENCE AND EVALUATION

1. In addition to having an evaluation plan, it's important to have a process in place for monitoring and adjusting the evaluation in response to new circumstances and findings. Takeaways:

   • Think of evaluation itself through a lens of continuous improvement. The evaluation plan is important for ensuring rigor, but stakeholders should be able to modify the evaluation plan and/or the program being evaluated if they learn—perhaps through the process of evaluation itself—that doing so would improve programmatic outcomes and impact.

   • Consider supporting the creation of better measurement tools for evaluating social change.

2. The evaluation design and implementation process should be inclusive. Takeaways:

   • Key partners and stakeholders, including community members, should be involved in articulating desired outcomes and the path to achieving them. Consider allowing partners to inform the evaluation methods and measures they consider most relevant and feasible, given the program's theory, scope, and resources.

   • When partnering with public systems such as school districts, be sure to determine, up front, what the system can and cannot do—particularly when seeking to obtain and/or share data. Learn how the system operates, develop relationships early on, and articulate a clear "ask," rather than assuming it can provide specific data on demand.

3. Overestimate the time, money, and staff capacity required to conduct a rigorous evaluation.

   • Assess subgrantees' readiness and capacities for evaluation, especially if programs are new, and fill any gaps. Make sure stakeholders and partners understand and can perform the tasks involved and be prepared to provide supports along the way.

   • Create a process for peer support—a community of practice—that enables subgrantees to let their guard down and solve problems together.

   • Stick with evaluation long enough for results to emerge. Be clear about what outcomes to expect at specific intervals and be willing to make in-course corrections.

4. Using evidence for short-term program improvement calls for a different set of capacities than long-term evaluation, and those capacities need to be intentionally developed and supported. Takeaways:

   • Be intentional about how evaluation information will be used from the beginning, when programs are being designed, so that the necessary skills and processes get built into the design. To facilitate the use of private data from public systems, be clear about how sharing the information will benefit those whom the system serves.

   • Create mechanisms and opportunities to obtain interim data from the evaluation so program leaders can make mid-course corrections. Include short-term measures of progress as well as long-term results, tied to meaningful benchmarks, and involve stakeholders in using and interpreting data.

SCALING PROMISING PROGRAMS
PILLAR 3 OF SIF

The Corporation for National and Community Service originally framed scaling as a way to make "what works" work for more people by expanding or replicating services in the current location or offering them to new places and populations. As the SIF unfolded, thought leaders in the social sector were advocating for an expanded definition in which scale also represents growth by achieving deeper, broader impact in already-served areas. The idea that scale can refer to impact as well as reach reflects an awareness that it is not always feasible to grow a single program or organization indefinitely and it is unrealistic to expect one organization or program to fill a major need on its own. Instead, scaling can include "spreading an idea or innovation, increasing adoption of a proven tool or practice, or changing behavior through policy" (Grantmakers for Effective Organizations 2011).

At first, the Greater Twin Cities United Way's SIF focused on increasing the number of children and youth served by subgrantees' programs. Indeed, the number grew from 8,015 in the grant's first year to almost 10,197 in Year 5. However, collaborators also embraced the idea that scale means greater impact. By the end of the grant period, intermediary partners had come to view scale in systemic terms, seeking to embed promising programs within systems so they would be deployed more broadly.

NUMBER OF CHILD & YOUTH SERVED

	Year 1	Year 5
Children & youth served	8,015	10,197

(Bar chart y-axis: 0; 2,000; 4,000; 6,000; 8,000; 10,000; 12,000)

ALL OF THE SUBGRANTEE ORGANIZATIONS SCALED UP THEIR PROGRAMS BY ONE OR BOTH OF THESE DEFINITIONS:

- **ServeMinnesota** delivered a new program, MAVRIC, to a subset of children through its established Minnesota Reading Corps model. This expansion required building out the organization's internal structure for recruitment, training, and materials production as well as service delivery. As of March 2018, MAVRIC served 3,592 children who had not received these services before the SIF grant.

- **Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood** was able to replicate and grow a pre-existing, culturally appropriate literacy program, Sankofa, within the SPPN infrastructure and partnerships. Over time, the subgrantee's integration and expansion strategy enabled the organization to serve more students than Sankofa had served in the past.

> **SIF encouraged us to think beyond scaling numbers, to all the other things that have to be in place to scale – the practice and principles behind the programs. Our partner now has funding to expand the model that developed as a result of conversations about scale.**

~Muneer Karcher-Romas, Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood

- **College Possible** was in its pilot phase at the beginning of SIF, so its scale-up included establishing the model as an ongoing program, serving young people for longer periods and refining the college coaching approach.

- After a dip between its first and second year, **AchieveMpls'** STEP-UP program increased the number of students accepted, completing work-readiness training, and placed in and completing internships.

- **The Tutoring Partnership** enhanced services for organizations already participating in Saint Paul and expanded services to those organizations' Minneapolis locations. This resulted in a temporary increase of children being served to almost 10,000 students in the 2015/16 school year, just before the entity that operated the Tutoring Partnership dissolved in 2016.

- **Way to Grow's** Great by Eight programming for school-aged children grew to serve more children in kindergarten through third grade (from 757 in Year 1 to 947 by the end of Year 4).

DESPITE THESE ACCOMPLISHMENTS, SCALING PROVED CHALLENGING AT TIMES BECAUSE OF:

- **Perceived tensions between scale-up and evaluation.** For some nonprofits, concerns about deviating from the evaluation design sometimes prevented scaling in ways that were meaningful to them but would have meant changes to the model. For instance, it kept Sankofa leaders from adding more schools or allowing students to participate for more than one year. The pressure to wait for evidence of effectiveness before scaling also caused tension for programs that could not show short-term impact or had to wait for evaluators to release impact findings. These programs faced two choices: to not scale, or to scale without knowing if the program or practice was effective.

- **Differences in community context.** The Twin Cities and their many neighborhoods are highly diverse in terms of population, resources, and infrastructure. Programs and practices that were effective in one neighborhood could not be guaranteed effective if expanded widely across one of the cities or from one city to the other.

- **Geographic constraints.** United Way and Generation Next restricted its SIF grant to Minneapolis and Saint Paul, so scaling by expanding to an outer suburb was not an option for subgrantees.

LESSONS ABOUT SCALING PROMISING PROGRAMS

1. Scaling can mean more than just reaching more people. Instead, or in addition, it can mean serving the same people better by providing more culturally relevant, equitable, effective, or seamless services and supports. Takeaways:

   • Work with partners to agree upon a shared definition and purpose for scaling.

   • Discuss what "scale" means in the context of specific programs, goals, communities, and resources. Consider whether the plan for scaling is feasible given the resources at hand and the existing supply and demand for similar programs and services.

> " *What I appreciated about SIF is we were allowed to continue with the grant even if we didn't show immediate impact in Year 1 or 2. It's hard to be innovative if a funder only gives you one year to show results.* "
>
> ~Jouapag Lee, St. Paul Promise Neighborhood

2. Scaling takes time. Takeaways:

   • As with evaluation, it's important not to give up too soon, especially when grantees have to address implementation challenges before they can scale.

   • Be realistic about the time needed to achieve scale (by whatever definition partners use).

   • Have a plan for how to sustain the program at scale for the long term.

3. Scaling while maintaining the quality of existing services requires attention, resources, and readiness.

   • Consider whether the program or organization is ready to do more than what it currently does. Does it have the necessary capacities—strategies, systems, and infrastructure—or do those need to be developed first?

   • Consider how the program will cover the human, financial, and organizational costs of recruiting, training, delivering, and evaluating services; forging new connections; collaborating; and monitoring quality for new programs or relationships so scaling doesn't "hollow out" existing programs.

CAPTURING, SHARING, AND APPLYING KNOWLEDGE
PILLAR 4 OF SIF

GTCUW and Generation Next supported some activities to help SIF subgrantees capture, share, and apply knowledge. These activities usually occurred in response to a specific, identified need rather than as a matter of course or at regularly scheduled intervals. For example, during a group meeting several subgrantees expressed interest in learning how to communicate their evaluation findings, so GTCUW staff arranged for them to receive information and materials from the GreenLight Fund, a SIF grantee working in Boston, Philadelphia, and the San Francisco Bay Area. GTCUW also shared guidance from CNCS' Knowledge Network and a technical assistance provider with subgrantees.

The main way that GTCUW identified learning opportunities was through the subgrantees quarterly written reports, which solicited feedback on progress, challenges, and technical assistance needs. Based on information in the reports, GTCUW staff connected people when appropriate with their counterparts at other organizations for peer support—for example, linking staff from ServeMinnesota with staff from Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood's culturally focused Sankofa program to help the former make MAVRIC vocabulary materials more culturally relevant. Staff from AchieveMpls, meanwhile, used SIF funds to visit and learn from other youth development programs in Boston and New York City.

During Generation Next's first three years of operation, the organization's leaders organized city-wide action networks aligned with the cradle-to-career goals. The networks, which met approximately once a month, were an attempt to "capture and harness grassroots knowledge" about a specific topic, identify challenges, and develop collaborative responses, and SIF subgrantees were invited to join the meetings. In addition, about twice a year GTCUW convened a SIF evaluation workgroup that brought representatives from all the subgrantee organizations and their evaluators together for a day of discussion.

In retrospect, intermediary partners say that the effort to share and use knowledge should have been more intentional and explicit. "The reality is, the sharing information piece was the last thing to happen, and it got deprioritized," acknowledges Naomi Zuk-Fisher, senior program manager at GTCUW. Limited human resources were one barrier: the intermediary partners' SIF roles represented only a portion of their entire responsibilities, and all had to juggle performance, compliance, evaluation, and fundraising along with learning.

Another challenge was ambiguity in the intermediary partners' roles regarding learning. "I don't know that we understood clearly where our role started and ended, or whether we claimed a role in educating others about SIF," says Michelle Walker, executive director of Generation Next. "That was also a reflection of Generation Next's own [focus on] running our projects and talking about our initiatives. There wasn't foresight about broadening the conversation to include what we were learning." Due to these challenges, knowledge was not shared as broadly as it could have been not only among subgrantees but also within GTCUW and Generation Next and with key stakeholders outside the grant, such as local funders and school systems.

" *That community of practice and shared vulnerability was really valuable.* "

~Jouapag Lee, St. Paul Promise Neighborhood

Nonetheless, the efforts to generate and share knowledge did add value to the subgrantees' efforts. Subgrantees learned skills they would not otherwise have gained, such as the ability to use and understand evaluation methods. They also helped each other solve some problems, such as figuring out how to obtain data. And they developed a sense of community, characterized by a feeling that "we're all in this together."

LESSONS ABOUT CAPTURING, SHARING, AND APPLYING KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge probably won't be fully shared or used unless knowledge development is an intentional activity, built into the grant's design, infrastructure, and budget. Takeaways:

- Create regularly scheduled opportunities to facilitate and coordinate learning within and among subgrantees.

- Develop structures, processes, and products that convert information into explicit knowledge and share it broadly, within and across organizations.

- Be sure to commit adequate resources to learning (e.g., time for reflection, staff leadership, documentation expertise, communications support).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The SIF grant represented a new way of working for GTCUW, Generation Next, and the nonprofit subgrantees— one that fostered growth, rigor, innovation, and impact while encouraging new roles and relationships. Stakeholders view the grant as a mostly positive experience. Even with the challenges they experienced, the people whose observations informed this report say they would enter into this type of partnership again—with the modifications outlined in the lessons, including:

- Time and support for community involvement in co-design;

- A structure and process for securing the time, staffing, and funding needed to establish evidence of efficacy, build capacities, and scale up results;

- Clearer definition of roles and expectations, up front;

- A less rigid evaluation framework and better measurement tools;

- Definitions for evidence, impact, and scale that reflect local realities and are shared by all stakeholders;

- Structures and processes for peer learning and communication; and

- A less time-consuming and labor-intensive system for tracking progress and outcomes.

A clear theme in the lessons is the importance of authentic community engagement in all of these activities. In addition, this type of endeavor seems to require a commitment to continuous improvement and risk-taking— exhibited in both the funder's expectations and the grantees' cultures—so that participants have leeway to innovate and, when necessary, "fail forward." That leeway becomes especially valuable in a funding environment that emphasizes pay for success and results-based investing; it is easy for promising but still-evolving programs to fall by the wayside in the push toward evidence-based models.

All of these observations point to one inescapable conclusion that also serves as a call to action: Achieving innovative, evidence-based impact at scale is a long process that requires continued patience, funding, and support. If measurable results are not immediately forthcoming in a well-designed, well-implemented program, the appropriate response may well be not to give up but to do more, for a longer period of time.