The Hewlett Foundation's Next Phase of Work in International Education:
Improving Learning Outcomes through Transparency, Accountability & Participation

The Hewlett Foundation has been making grants to improve the quality of education in developing countries since 2006. The Foundation's special initiative, Quality Education in Developing Countries ("QEDC"), which was co-funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has focused on ensuring that children not only are in school, but are also *learning*. The end of 2014 marks the formal end of the QEDC initiative, which was envisioned by both the Hewlett and Gates Foundations as a time-bound effort. It also marks the beginning of a new phase of education grantmaking at the Foundation, one that will focus on greater transparency about and accountability for learning outcomes, particularly on the part of governments in developing countries and international donors.

This document provides a retrospective view on the first phase of work, describes the rationale for this next phase of work, and lays out the three grantmaking strategies that we plan to pursue. The thinking behind these strategies has been informed by reviewing existing grants, extracting lessons from those grants and the literature, and consulting with a broad range of experts. We are grateful to the individuals and organizations that provided comments on an earlier version of this document, and we look forward to continued learning and iteration with colleagues as the strategy evolves.

Phase 1: Quality Education in Developing Countries

When the Foundation began the QEDC initiative in 2006, our analysis led us to believe that the world faced a learning crisis: more children were enrolled in school, but too often they left school without becoming proficient in even the basics of reading and math. As outlined in our 2008 strategy, we pursued a two-pronged approach to tackling the learning crisis. First, we felt it was important to highlight the crisis and generate political will to address it. To do so, we supported citizen-led, household-based assessments of children's learning that revealed the extent of the learning crisis to parents, local officials, the media, donors, and policymakers and created pressure to act. Second, we sought to test some potential solutions to the learning crisis that governments could adopt. We funded organizations working with schools, teachers, parents, and communities to improve outcomes for children. In parallel, we funded rigorous evaluations to measure the impact of the interventions, building evidence about how to improve learning outcomes.

As a result of these efforts and the efforts of others, the world looks different now than it did in 2006. First, the learning crisis is no longer invisible. Parents, educators, governments, and donors know about the crisis in part because our grantees have measured it and communicated the results. Second, a visible learning crisis has inspired donors and governments to act. Since 2010 the largest donors to basic education—including the World Bank, the US Agency for International Development, the UK Department for International Development, and the Global Partnership for Education—launched new strategies focused on improving learning. In several countries, planning commissions, parliamentarians, and ministries of education are publically acknowledging the crisis and designing policies and programs to improve student outcomes. Globally, learning is squarely on

the agenda in discussions about the Sustainable Development Goals, successors to the Millennium Development Goals, which will be adopted in 2015. Third, evidence amassed by our grantees and others strongly suggests that when you focus on specific competencies and teach them well, children can and do learn, even in otherwise difficult conditions. Although the particularities of local contexts will define what solutions look like in any given place, the evaluations funded by the Foundation suggest broad principles for giving all children a fair chance at learning. These are synthesized in our report, Learning to Improve Learning.

As we sunset the QEDC initiative, our current analysis suggests that governments, donors, and NGOs are aware of the learning crisis and trying to do something about it. That said, there has not yet been a widespread turnaround in learning levels. There are still significant constraints to government systems successfully improving students' learning, including the fact that education governance, resource allocations, and incentives are not well aligned with improving learning. In addition, in many developing countries, the capacity to consistently use data well for policymaking and planning is limited.

Over the coming years, as governments face increasing pressure to act to improve learning outcomes, there is a risk that the focus will be entirely on more and higher quality education system inputs: more teachers, more books, improved curricula. It is easier to manipulate and track education inputs than it is to affect outcomes and is therefore tempting to focus on inputs that *should* improve learning—without ensuring that they actually do. Making real gains to improve learning will require reliable data and continual feedback loops to measure progress. It will require not only the supply-side solutions that are being amassed, but also demand-side pressure for attention to learning outcomes. All of these factors inform the focus in our next phase of work on international education.

Phase 2: Focus on Learning with a Transparency & Accountability Lens

Given that there has been a dramatic change in the dialogue in education to focus on access *plus* learning but not yet the attendant improvements in actual levels of student learning, we believe the Foundation should **maintain its focus on promoting learning outcomes**. Furthermore, we think the Foundation has special value to add in continuing its pursuit for improved learning outcomes **through interventions that help to improve the transparency of education outcomes and increase accountability for those outcomes through participation of citizens**. A focus on education through transparency and accountability means that we will continue to build on the work to support citizen-led, household-based assessments of learning started under QEDC. At the same time, we will no longer be funding classroom-level interventions and evaluations to improve teaching and learning.

These changes are motivated by both external and internal factors. Externally, our experience in education so far suggests a clear need to work on the incentives and feedback loops that inform decisions on how education is governed in order to achieve learning gains. Governments and many large bilateral donors are increasing their own funding for technical approaches to improving learning like teacher training, curriculum development, and other pursuits. The Foundation's resources are limited in comparison to the resources these governments and donors are now bringing to bear on this part of the problem. An emphasis on transparency and accountability can help to make good on these larger investments by providing ongoing feedback

and pressure for those funds to be spent in ways that ultimately improve learning outcomes. It can also help to create the type of demand-side pressure that can provoke governments to adopt effective solutions that are surfacing.

Internally, the Foundation has a longstanding commitment to advance transparency, accountability, and participation for better service delivery, which we can draw on to implement this strategy. Furthermore, testing how transparency, accountability, and participation interventions can close gaps in education governance and lead to better learning outcomes for children will not only advance the education sector, but will also inform the broader transparency and accountability community. A major question for that field is what the conditions are under which transparency leads to greater accountability and how that, in turn, influences service delivery outcomes. This approach will help provide more evidence on exactly that question. Furthermore, it will help inform whether a transparency and accountability approach that focuses on providing information on service delivery outcomes can help promote improvements in those very outcomes. Within that broader community, many interventions have tracked *inputs* (like whether schools get the money and books that they are supposed to get), some have monitored service delivery *processes* (like whether teachers and nurses show up to work), but fewer have measured ultimate *outcomes*.

The remainder of this document lays out the three grantmaking strategies that we plan to pursue: (1) support learning assessments with citizen engagement; (2) explore how assessments can be used to promote local action; and (3) encourage and evaluate ways assessments and other evidence can be used to promote policy action. The full strategy is depicted in a diagram at the end of this document.

Support Learning Assessments with Citizen Engagement

At the heart of our work to improve learning outcomes will be an **emphasis on supporting and expanding citizen-led, household-based learning assessments** with transparent, openly available, widely disseminated results that are used to inform policy and practice. Although there have been many transparency and accountability efforts in the education sector to identify and track specific inputs like school grants, classroom infrastructure, and textbooks, these inputs are only loosely linked with education outcomes.[1] Indeed, given that the most critical input for education is the interaction between teachers and their students, these inputs may be necessary but they are far from sufficient. In an environment where donors are increasingly investing in country-led education strategies, outcome-based measures of education system performance can help to create pressure for policies, resource allocations, and practices that deliver higher quality services and better results.

In such an environment, transparent and widely available learning performance measures are critical for driving accountability for learning. The bulk of these investments would be continued support for citizen-led learning assessments like ASER in India, Uwezo in East Africa, Beekunko in Mali, Jangandoo in Senegal, and the newly emerging MIA in Mexico, which for now focus primarily on assessing foundational skills of reading and math.[2] These organizations have mobilized tens of

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[1] Numerous studies comparing learning achievement to spending per pupil within and across countries show little to no correlation between the two. For one recent example, see Lant Pritchett's 2013 book, *The Rebirth of Education*.

[2] The bulk of our resources for these assessments will continue to be devoted to assessment of foundational skills. However, many of our grantees are starting to explore other areas of assessment including early childhood

thousands of volunteers to survey a representative sample of households in each district or department and test children in reading and math using a simple tool. In 2013 they assessed over one million children. The dispiriting results have sparked local, national and global conversations about the learning crisis. For example, India's 12th Five Year Plan's first priority for primary education is monitoring and improving learning outcomes. In Mali, communities have gathered to develop plans for improving education quality. In Senegal, a Presidential commission on the state of education recommended a greater focus on educational quality and learning. In Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, Parliamentarians are asking questions about the learning crisis.

We think that the household-based features of these assessments are important for at least three reasons: (1) having citizens engage in the assessment is integral in stimulating citizen action and strengthening the accountability relationship between citizens and service providers, public officials, and the government; (2) household assessments capture a population-based sample of *all* children, whether in-school, out-of-school, attending formal or informal schools, etc.; and (3) by including children from both public and private schools, these assessments create performance pressure for all schools, which can open important conversations about education governance in countries and regions where poor and marginalized children are increasingly enrolling in private schools.

This type of assessment is *not* a substitute for national or regional government assessments, but it is an important complement. In countries where governments are not already conducting frequent and reliable assessments, citizen-led assessments have often helped spur them to do so. In countries where governments do conduct regular assessments of learning, citizen-led assessments serve to independently validate findings and can influence governments to more openly share assessment data. The combination of government-administered and independent assessments can be a powerful tool to track how well governments are doing in delivering on the promise of better learning, and create pressure for more concerted and coordinated action to address gaps. While most of our grantmaking will focus on external, citizen-led assessments, we also plan to support targeted efforts such as the [Learning Metrics Task Force](#) to build consensus around learning indicators and strengthen capacity for their use at the country and regional level.

We plan to explore ways of expanding citizen-led assessments to cover additional countries, assuming there are countries with appropriate civil society organizations that see it as a useful tool. Expansion would help support accountability for learning in more countries, it would provide meaningful comparisons to results in other countries, and it would continue to elevate learning in national, regional, and global discourse. Several considerations would factor into our decisions about which countries to choose for expansion. Geographically, we would prioritize countries where we find large numbers of children with low learning outcomes; demand and commitment for use of data among governments, donors, and other organizations; and dynamic and capable organizations with deep interest in this work. Pragmatically, given the limits of our own resources we would also focus on countries where there are opportunities for co-funding with other donors.

Expansion will be accompanied by an explicit agenda to learn about the impact of this type of assessment and to continually refine and improve upon the existing models. Findings from existing and [emerging evaluations](#) suggest, for example, that it may take more concerted efforts to influence citizen action, that advocacy messages could be more nuanced than just exposing the problem of low learning levels, and that the assessment data hasn't been utilized as fully as it could

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indicators and higher-level and non-cognitive skills. We are open to exploring new possibilities where there is demand and opportunity to affect change on a broader level of skills.

be. This process of continual learning and improvement around citizen-led assessments is the driving force behind the other two areas of the strategy that we turn to next. Our work on assessments will also seek to include the following features:

- Build in some level of comparability across countries and to global learning indicators.
- Exploit these datasets more with additional in-depth studies and by drawing on complementary data like that from the Service Delivery Indicators project of the World Bank.
- Explore testing higher-level and non-cognitive skills.
- Link data on learning with data on education budgets and other resource tracking.
- Promote linkages with future sustainable development and Education for All goals and indicator tracking.
- Measure progress against the strategies and financing of donors like the Global Partnership for Education.

Explore How Assessments Promote Local Action

As important as a valid accountability structure is, assessments alone are not sufficient for improving education systems and learning outcomes. In addition to collecting information on learning, we also plan to **explore how best to engage local actors—including parents, teachers, local officials, and other community leaders—to use this information for action**. There are several notable barriers to citizen engagement with assessment results, which are helpfully documented in a recent [evaluation](#) of Uwezo Kenya by Lieberman, Posner, and Tsai[3]. For instance, parents do not always expect their children to have better outcomes, so the results of the assessment may not be shocking to them. Even when they are appalled by the results, they may not feel that they can do much to change them or see their role in accountability if they think school is the government's responsibility and a place where they have limited authority. In fact, the easiest action to take may be to remove their children from school. Nevertheless, parents have a critical role to play in improving learning outcomes, not only by holding their schools and policymakers accountable, but also by directly investing in and encouraging their children's performance. Similarly, teachers and school leaders may not have the right mix of incentives and know-how for using assessment as a tool for improving classroom instruction.

We plan to make grants that help unpack the conditions under which assessment results spark constructive citizen action and the ways in which factors like adult literacy rates, civic space, and other socioeconomic factors affect this. Aligned with recent findings from the literature, we will look at how to move towards strategic campaigns that link information with credible pathways to change.[4] Investments in this area of the strategy would explore two facets: (1) how to present assessment information in ways that are most likely to incite action; and (2) what else to couple with assessment information in order to increase the likelihood that action will be taken. In terms of packaging the information itself, we will look at approaches like:

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[3] Lieberman, Posner and Tsai. *Does Information Lead to More Active Citizenship? Evidence from an Education Intervention in Rural Kenya.* World Development, Volume 60, August 2014, Pages 69-83.

[4] Fox. *Social Accountability: What does the Evidence Really Say?*. Global Partnership for Social Accountability Working Paper No. 1, September 2014.

- *How to improve communication of results at the community level.* Are negative messages ("learning is terrible") or positive messages ("here is what's working in this neighboring place") more salient for action? How should results be contextualized (e.g. providing results in comparison with expectations; framing results in relation to what is possible in other similar places; suggesting specific actions that citizens can take)? What messages work best for different audiences?
- *The additional benefits of combining the external assessment findings with other data* that can help reveal correlates to poor learning outcomes and thereby identify concrete obstacles to learning around which citizens could galvanize. For example, building off classroom observation tools developed by the World Bank and data collected by the World Bank's Service Delivery Indicators project and others might help highlight how effectively available resources are being used.

In terms of what else to pursue alongside of information sharing, we will consider approaches like:

- *The additional benefits of combining the external assessment findings with other initiatives.* This might include improving teachers' (and teacher supporters') abilities to conduct formative assessments and use the results for improving learning; running time-bound competitions for learning-level improvement (e.g., a competition around "100 Days to Reading" that sets a challenge for results and a time period in which to achieve it); [5] integrating the results with existing civic education or adult literacy initiatives; and ensuring that enough funding is available for local use and creating incentives for local participation.
- *What governance structures and modalities enable the most effective citizen participation.* For example, promoting more evidence-based local decision-making, with clearer mechanisms for citizen input, coupled with centralized standards and measurements of outcomes. This work might help unpack the complexities of school-level accountability relationships.

Encourage and Evaluate How Assessments Can Promote Policy Action

The final strategy area we plan to pursue is **linking assessment results to action at the policy level**. We expect to pursue this nationally, regionally, and globally. Although governments and donors are increasingly focused on improving learning outcomes, they seem stuck in how to work most effectively to deliver on that promise at significant scale. Organizations that monitor donors are looking at how much money is given, not how effectively it is used and whether the most marginalized are being reached. Accordingly, we see three important ways to more tightly link the use of assessment results to policy formulation:

- *Support evidence-based policy advocacy, campaigns, and citizen movements to hold donors and governments accountable for their commitments to learning.* Policy research organizations could do more work to *translate the evidence on learning* to shape policy and drive resource allocation. For example, by promoting the use of a "best available evidence" test that would encourage governments and donors to fund approaches that have

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[5] Drawing in part on ideas put forth in Rapid Results and experiences by NGOs like Pratham which have found significant improvements possible in 100 Days, as with a program in the district of Jehanabad in Bihar.

proven links to learning improvement, encouraging donors to make their funding conditional on the provision and use of transparent and regular data on learning outcomes, and tracking whether those resources are being used appropriately. Advocacy organizations could launch campaigns to engage teachers unions and other citizen's groups, the private sector, and national or regional bodies as partners for driving improvements in learning outcomes forward.

- *Push for disclosure of education and learning data in global norm efforts* like the Open Government Partnership and work of the International Budget Partnership. This will allow us to build on the strengths of already existing Foundation partners.
- *Use the sustainable development and Education for All goals to promote better government assessment and accountability for learning outcomes.* There will be lots of opportunities to use transparency, accountability, and participation mechanisms—including citizen and institutional oversight and budget transparency—to track whatever targets are put into the sustainable development and Education for All agendas. As part of this agenda, we expect to continue our support to efforts like the [Learning Metrics Task Force](#) to develop openly available indicators and tools for learning assessments and support government capacity to track learning through their own assessments.

Deepen Our Understanding of How to Promote Better Service Delivery Outcomes through Transparency & Accountability Efforts

The centerpiece of the strategy outlined in this document is citizen-led, household-based assessments of learning outcomes. Mindful that transparency around learning outcomes is far from guaranteed to lead to accountability for more effective service delivery, the strategy couples these assessments with an explicit agenda for discovering when and under what conditions these efforts spark local and national action to improve learning. Given that the way in which citizen-led, household-based assessments are conducted are part and parcel of trying to stimulate action, in practical terms, a single organization, coalition or partnership may seek to work across all three strands of this strategy. Over the next three to five years, we hope this strategy will help us to achieve the following outcomes:

- Independent, citizen-led assessments become a standard practice in additional countries, expanding the availability and use of reliable data on learning outcomes.
- Evidence about whether and under what conditions learning assessment results can contribute to generating citizen participation for better learning outcomes and/or strengthen policy action to improve learning outcomes.
- Better understanding of successful models of outcomes-focused transparency and accountability interventions that could be spread to improve education governance or adapted in other sectors.

The ultimate objective is to see these efforts help generate a paradigm shift in which governments, donors, and other education actors continually monitor children's learning and support policies and programs to optimize learning outcomes. It may be threatened by the shrinking civic space and political instability in countries, which are risks that we will need to continually monitor. Given the complexity of sustained behavior change, we also recognize that success against our ultimate outcome will also depend on the efforts of many actors beyond the Hewlett

Foundation who are focused on various parts of the learning chain. Furthermore, our underlying theory of change is based on a number of assumptions that still need to be tested, and thus our near term objective is to inform whether and how the field of transparency and accountability can move toward greater impact on service delivery outcomes. We think this strategy presents a significant opportunity to continue to pursue our education-related goals, to take advantage of the strengths of partners from across the Foundation's Transparency, Accountability, and Participation grantmaking portfolio, as well as to test what information triggers citizen action in an area of their lives that people and societies care about deeply and value: education.

Grantmaking Activities	Grant Outcomes

DATA
Support learning assessments with citizen engagement

LOCAL ACTION
Support and evaluate ways assessments can be used to promote citizen action
(in a small sub-set of countries)

POLICY ACTION
Support and evaluate ways assessments can be used to promote policy action
(especially at a global level and through existing T/A/P grantees)

Credible data on learning outcomes and analytical tools for measuring them available and widely used

Citizens take direct action to improve learning and hold leaders accountable for the same

Deepened understanding of conditions under which information leads to action

Government investments in education used to support learning

Donor investments in education used to support learning

Paradigm shift to learning:
Governments, donors, and other education actors continually monitor children's learning and support policies and programs to optimize children's learning.

Informing the field:
Successful models of outcomes-focused transparency and accountability interventions identified and emulated in at least one other sector.

Improved Learning Outcomes