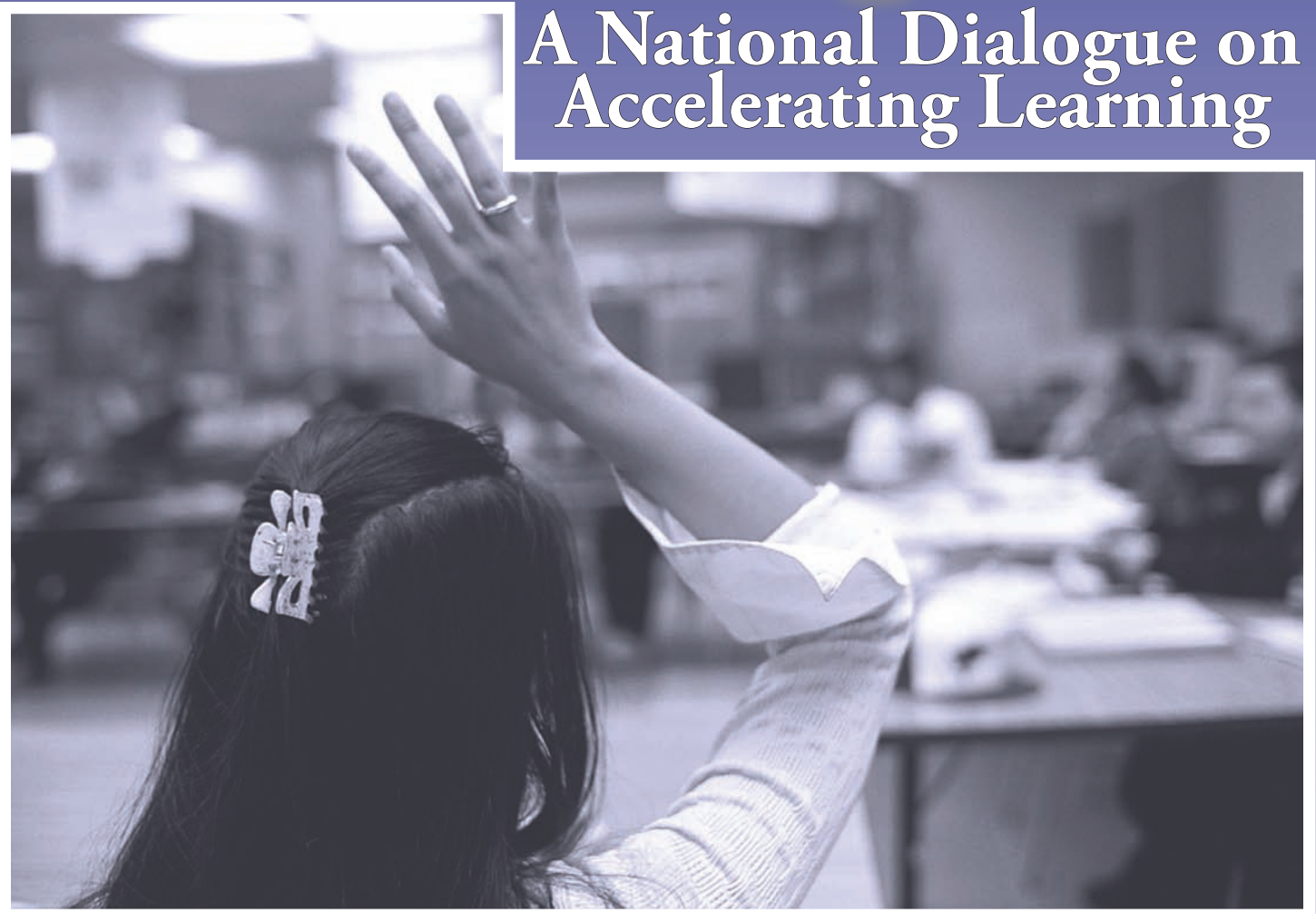


# *Postcards from the Margin:*

A National Dialogue on  
Accelerating Learning



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The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the view of Lumina Foundation for Education, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, or their employees.

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## THE ROAD TO ATLANTA

The relatively brief history of the U.S. education system has been marked by a series of adaptive innovations, changes in policy and practice driven by the need to better align schools and colleges with economic and social realities. The emergence of accelerated learning—the multiple pathways for navigating the border between secondary and postsecondary education—offers a prime example of just such an innovation.\* Accelerated learning is a cluster of programs such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual/concurrent enrollment, Early College High Schools, and Tech-Prep, all with varying purposes, stakeholders, and consumers. All, however, are unified by an overarching objective of making the “border” between high school and college or the workforce more navigable.

As with many adaptive innovations, the creation and evolution of many (if not most) accelerated learning options has outpaced the development of a policy infrastructure to support and evaluate the expanding menu of options. On the whole, accelerated learning has matured to the point where local, state, and national stakeholders must be prepared to make critical decisions regarding whether and how these programs are integrated into their policy agendas. Faced with these decisions, policymakers and practitioners seek a more comprehensive understanding of accelerated learning, as well as a culture based on evidence and the resources to support these options.

The fiscal and policy environments surrounding accelerated learning present significant opportunities for and potential obstacles to further experimentation and development. At all levels of government, funding remains limited, with increasing pressure for maximum return on investment. Evidence is also mounting that the United States is lagging in human capital formation, increasing scrutiny of leaks in the educational pipeline. Both of these factors are causing policymakers to focus more attention on educational transitions and ask tough questions about priorities

\*This set of options is also called secondary/postsecondary learning options (SPLOs) and credit-based transition programs. All these options share the goal of providing students with college-level learning in high school; most have the purpose of compressing the time to a postsecondary credential and saving dollars for families and the state.

and policy options. In addition, families are attracted to accelerated learning options because they see them as a way to combat the increases in college tuition that can make a postsecondary degree appear out of reach.

As adaptive and innovative as accelerated learning approaches might be, though, they still present more questions than answers at a time when budgets are tight, time is short, and global competition is increasingly fierce.

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## THE NATIONAL FORUM

Against this backdrop, a diverse group of approximately 250 stakeholders—elected leaders, educators, researchers, and foundation officials— assembled in Atlanta in June 2006 for a first-of-its-kind gathering on accelerated learning. *Accelerated Learning: Shaping Public Policy to Serve Underrepresented Youth*, sponsored by Jobs for the Future (JFF) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), marked an important evolutionary step for this adaptive innovation, connecting often disconnected conversations and providing a venue to identify and debate key issues and catalyze further research.

While some participants came away from the two-day event with unresolved questions about the status and direction of accelerated learning, the forum stimulated an exchange of ideas and perspectives that promises to advance the policy conversations surrounding these issues. Perhaps most importantly, the meeting made a substantial contribution to the nascent body of knowledge on these approaches for high school students, attempting to clarify what is known, what is unknown, and what must be known moving forward.

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## THE ISSUES: GROWING PAINS FOR A MATURING MOVEMENT

Formal presentations and informal discussions at the national forum centered on four primary issues related to accelerated learning: mission and purpose, culture of evidence, quality and rigor, and finance.

Participants were quick to point out that there is considerable overlap among these issues. Plenary and breakout sessions, as well as conversations over meals and breaks, alternated between the conceptual and philosophical aspects of accelerated learning and the practical applications and promising practices at the state and local levels. The tension between the two was at times palpable, reflecting the diversity of participants and presenters.

## **MISSION AND PURPOSE**

The forum made clear that there are varying—and sometimes conflicting—viewpoints regarding what accelerated learning is supposed to accomplish, even among stakeholders from the same state. Some approach accelerated learning from a “completion” perspective, arguing that increasing academic productivity and shortening time-to-degree are and should be major objectives for these programs. This perspective is especially prevalent among elected leaders and national observers, who cite graduation rate statistics and international comparisons on educational attainment in arguing for a more efficient educational pipeline.

Closely related to this is the idea that accelerated learning should be used to maximize return on the public’s educational investment. This is also a viewpoint commonly associated with elected leaders, although a number of school, district, campus, and system leaders also referenced this in their discussions throughout the forum. Debate in this area was stimulated and sustained by research from Augenblick, Palaich, and Associates (APA) showing positive financial returns from investments in Early College High Schools in selected states. Not surprisingly, program administrators at the point of delivery were somewhat less likely to emphasize this factor in formal and informal discussions.

Other attendees placed more emphasis on the enrichment potential of accelerated learning options, holding to the belief that closing the “expectations gap” for historically disadvantaged and underrepresented populations should claim priority. Several speakers underscored this, making the point that at-risk students are more responsive to challenge than to remediation and using Early

College High Schools as an example. Keynote speaker Freeman Hrabowski, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, urged attendees to look beyond throughput and output questions when thinking about accelerated learning, declaring, “I have a problem with acceleration only.” A number of practitioners also stressed this perspective, indicating that their accelerated learning programs work well in developing a menu of post-high school options for academically and economically at-risk students, and that acceleration is not just going faster but structuring the learning experience and teaching in a more effective way. Acceleration motivates students by challenging them rather than remediating them.

These differences surfaced throughout the forum. On the one hand, this should not be surprising or disturbing, because unanimity among stakeholders in this area is probably an unrealistic goal. On the other hand, such a diversity of perspectives strongly underscores the need for convening and communication mechanisms that cross educational sectors and focus on accelerated learning. Several participants indicated that stakeholders in their states had not yet focused on these issues, and that the forum had provided the first such opportunity.

Attendees also attempted to take up the broader existential question posed at the forum’s opening: does accelerated learning represent a step on the way to “what’s next” in educational pipeline reform, or is it in fact “what’s next?” Several panelists and a number of presenters argued that “accelerated” is a misnomer because the general push for college and workforce readiness should make accelerated learning the rule rather than the exception. Others asserted that accelerated learning must remain focused, particularly on underrepresented and disadvantaged students. The gathering did not resolve this question, but participants sketched out competing schools of thought.

Mission and purpose are among the less explored and debated dimensions of accelerated learning. State and local policymakers and practitioners came away from the experience with a broader view of the policy and programmatic options available to them, but they were still seeking tools and insights to make sense of accelerated learning and fit it into their policy agendas.

## Discussion Questions

- Are policymakers expecting too much from accelerated learning options? Are practitioners expecting too little?
- Should accelerated learning be viewed as a jumping-off point on the way to another public policy goal, or as a policy end in itself?

## CULTURE OF EVIDENCE

Questions surrounding the robustness of a culture of evidence in accelerated learning stimulated some of the richest and most contentious exchanges of the forum. At times, it appeared that participants and speakers, especially researchers and practitioners, were talking past one another rather than with one another. While analysts (and some policymakers) emphasized the dearth of comprehensive, comparable information regarding accelerated learning's resources and results, practitioners stressed that significant data are in fact being gathered. The difference turned out to be less about whether a true culture of evidence exists and more about how to strengthen such a culture and bring it to scale.

The forum started with the assumption that the existing body of evidence on accelerated learning is weak and uneven. Betsy Brand of the American Youth Policy Forum underscored and illustrated this point, citing conclusions from the College Ladder, a two-year research project that evaluated twenty-two postsecondary transition initiatives. While the project was able to identify some signs of positive performance, it also concluded that the initiatives collected insufficient data for a thorough analysis of outcomes (due to lack of longitudinal data and an inability to disaggregate).

Over the course of the gathering, speakers and attendees brought forward a range of prospective tools and approaches that offer promise. The most significant of these align with the primary evidence-related recommendations from a new WICHE report, *Accelerated Learning Options: Moving the Needle on Access and Success*:

- **Through legislation, lawmakers should require their state departments**

**of education and postsecondary institutions and systems to collaborate in the design, collection, and analysis, and reporting of data that will provide the essential elements to examine student participation in accelerated learning options.**

Representatives from two states (Minnesota And Utah) described their progress toward a unified K-20 data system (using a unique student identifier), which will greatly facilitate information gathering and analysis across the secondary/postsecondary divide. These efforts fall in line with the aims of the Data Quality Campaign, which has set a goal of integrated education data systems in all 50 states by 2009.

- **A national effort is needed to establish consistency in collecting, analyzing, and reporting across states on student participation in accelerated learning options.** Attendees generally agreed that building a cross-state data infrastructure on accelerated learning participation and results would be advisable, but they spent relatively little time discussing what entities would be responsible for the enterprise or how it would be structured. While targeted supplements to National Center for Education Statistics surveys and the development of a student unit record database would improve the quality and quantity of information available, development and implementation of these options would likely be years in the making.
- **The research community should collaborate with the federal government, state departments of education, and postsecondary education to design and conduct studies that will provide the evidence-based research needed to help policymakers and others understand the effectiveness of accelerated learning options on access and success for all students.** In addition to the work done by the American Youth Policy Forum on the College Ladder, the forum featured a substantive discussion of research advances in the area of finance. Participants reviewed and critiqued the analysis of return on investment

for Early College High Schools conducted by Augenblick, Palaich, and Associates. Working with a combination state, federal, and school data, APA found that Early College High Schools in New York and California would provide a positive return on investment (\$1.43/\$2.06 per \$1 invested over 15 years; \$2.69/\$3.90 per \$1 invested over 25 years), provided that their cost structures did not differ too greatly from those of traditional high schools.

The ensuing conversation revealed there are two next steps of building a culture of evidence in this area: calculating cost of completion (which addresses efficiency), and net cost (which addresses efficacy and sustainability). Attendees and researchers acknowledged the limitations of existing finance data, and agreed that more longitudinal data are needed for comprehensive assessments of cost effectiveness and sustainability.

- **Philanthropic organizations, state governments, and the federal governments should commit enough resources to support a robust, targeted agenda for research on accelerated learning options, including longitudinal cohort studies that can track students through secondary school and into higher education and the workforce.**

The need for a sustained commitment to data gathering, dissemination, and application surfaced as an issue throughout the forum, but it was especially stressed in a discussion of the role of philanthropies in supporting accelerated learning. Representatives from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Spencer Foundation spoke about the particular strengths philanthropy brings to the table in supporting and sustaining a culture of evidence, specifically, a convening capacity across educational sectors and evaluation frameworks.

Building and maintaining a robust, intentional infrastructure of performance and value-added metrics for accelerated learning represents an area of considerable promise, with ample opportunities for experimentation and innovation. The challenge is to establish leadership and coordination at all

levels—local, state, and national. Absent that, an “anarchy of innovation” will continue in accelerated learning, guided by educated hunches and case studies rather than hard data. Organizations such as JFF and WICHE, because of their reach and information-brokerage capacity, must seriously consider their role in advancing this component of the accelerated learning agenda.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Can a consistent, recognizable culture of evidence be sustained in a highly decentralized education system like that of the United States?
- How much of the work in bolstering a culture of evidence is reliant on policy, and how much on technology?

## **QUALITY AND RIGOR**

Some of the most consequential—and controversial—questions surrounding accelerated learning are those related to the quality and rigor of the accelerated learning experience. Such questions are consequential because the legitimacy of accelerated learning options as policy levers depends in no small part on solid evidence and clear protocols to ensure true acceleration—and controversial, because conceptions of rigor can and do vary according to sector, purpose, and site of delivery. The liveliest debates of the forum centered on these issues, and attendees clashed at points over the what and who of quality assurance. Consensus formed, however, around the College Ladder’s sage observation that assumptions about the products of accelerated learning must be continuously checked using appropriate data.

The forum kicked off on a note of healthy skepticism regarding the quality of accelerated learning options, with keynoter Freeman Hrabowski declaring that “rigorous isn’t always rigorous.” Other presenters echoed that point, citing instances of “blended” environments, where the same course is taught (by the same instructor) to some students for secondary credit and to others for postsecondary credit, although in the second case the course may not be equivalent to what would be offered on campus.

Conversely, several participants cited instances where students found an introductory college course less rigorous than what they were doing in high school. In a similar vein, JFF's review of concurrent and dual enrollment programs in states such as Georgia, Utah, Ohio, and Texas reveals that concerns about course rigor and comparability continue to dominate policy conversations.

These and other observations make clear that even among accelerated learning's most ardent advocates, questions linger about the fulfillment of its promise of collegiate preparation and advancement. States participating in the American Diploma Project, which seeks to define college-ready standards, may find that they will also have to address issues of quality for dual enrollment.

The quality debate hinges in part on courses that are taught for college credit only to high school students by a high school teacher, an adjunct, or a visiting faculty member at the high school, opening the possibility that there may be one standard for a class of college students on campus and another for high school students. A new organization, the National Association of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP), accredits programs in which "high school instructors teach . . . college courses during the normal school day." Under NACEP guidelines, "[I]nstructors . . . are part of a continuing collegial interaction, through annual professional development, required seminars, site visits, and ongoing communication with the postsecondary institutions." The mandate that there be ongoing assessment and program evaluation is a promising strategy for high-school based programs.

Along those lines, several attendees and speakers emphasized the value of explicit conversations and formal agreements between K-12 and postsecondary education systems regarding program purpose and content standards. Participants from Florida and South Dakota underscored this point, linking their successes in accelerated learning to a governing philosophy of rigorous quality control on the front end (for example, syllabus and instructor credential audits), reinforced by rigorous student assessments on the back end.

On the national front, accreditation of accelerated learning programs, specifically dual and concurrent enrollment programs, is developing as a quality assurance mechanism. At several points throughout the forum, representatives from NACEP referred to the statement of standards that it has established for recognition of dual and concurrent enrollment programs, which covers:

- Curriculum (e.g.; approval through the regular course approval process);
- Faculty (e.g.; proper training and orientation of high school faculty);
- Students (e.g., official status at a postsecondary institution);
- Assessment (e.g. equivalent standards for secondary and postsecondary students); and
- Evaluation (e.g. annual program assessment and evaluation).

While this framework does offer promise, the question arises as to how broadly applicable or adaptable it is to the full spectrum of accelerated learning options, particularly those such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate. Additionally, there is the question of what leverage will be necessary to make accreditation an industry standard for accelerated learning.

Given the fact that issues surrounding the quality and rigor of accelerated learning options have been the subject of debate for the better part of a generation, policymakers and practitioners must be realistic about timelines and achievable objectives. Moreover, advances in gauging the adequacy of accelerated learning initiatives are inextricably linked with the development of a robust, comprehensive culture of evidence. With these cautions in mind, accelerated learning's advocates must be prepared to move forward on multiple levels with respect to quality—or risk the credibility of these programs as a means to seal cracks in the educational pipeline.

## Discussion Questions

- Is the development of specialized accreditation for accelerated learning options the most effective vehicle for assuring quality and rigor, or are existing vehicles (such as regional accreditation) sufficient?
- What is the degree of correlation between the mode or format of accelerated learning programs and their results?

## FINANCE

Of all the major topics addressed by the forum, finance was most frequently cited as an area where practice is ahead of a cohesive policy framework. This point was underscored throughout the gathering—in observations that states’ funding for accelerated learning options lacks intentionality, as well as in a comment that these options are largely operating on “budget dust.” Virtually all in attendance agreed that these obstacles must be confronted if accelerated learning is to move from the margins of experimentation to the mainstream of policy.

The event also highlighted the fact that this desired movement runs headlong into issues related to clarifying accelerated learning’s mission and purpose and building a culture of evidence. Questions about the relative merits of various funding mechanisms were nearly always entwined with questions such as, “Why are we doing this?” and “Does accelerated learning add more value than other educational investments?” Participant exchanges, whether in sessions or in the hallways, made clear that there exists a wide range of responses to these questions, even within the same state.

Over the course of the meeting, presenters and participants advanced the process of fleshing out some of the fundamental issues (such as ownership, adequacy, and relationship to objectives) that policymakers and practitioners must address as they strive to build a coherent fiscal framework for accelerated learning. Also significant was the vetting of new analytical tools tested in the Early College High School environment. Perhaps most significantly, the forum spotlighted state-level case studies that point toward more rational and streamlined border

crossing with respect to funding. There appear to be steps in the right direction, even if it is clear that the border skirmishes are far from over when it comes to paying for accelerated learning options.

Despite the assertion by one speaker that finance issues should not be conceptually difficult even if they may be politically difficult, challenges do remain, even in states with progressive accelerated learning portfolios. Much of the challenge stems from the fact that two primary philosophies have developed around the fiscal aspect of accelerated learning: a public good viewpoint, focusing on social goods such as expanded opportunity; and an efficiency and return on investment perspective, which emphasizes maximization of public investment. These philosophies, while not mutually exclusive, can and do collide in the worlds of state and local education policy.

These differences most immediately come into play in discussions about the relationship of funding to mission and purpose. The forum featured a number of formal and informal debates over whether the goals for accelerated learning investments should be increased postsecondary access or greater financial leverage and reinvestment potential through reduced remediation or shortened time-to-degree. However, broad consensus did form around the point that accelerated learning’s marginal budgetary status in most states and districts is due in no small part to the lack of an intentional, cohesive policy framework that includes resource identification and allocation.

Also contributing to the largely ad hoc state of accelerated learning finance are weaknesses in data and evidence, as discussed above. Findings from the College Ladder point out that many stakeholder intuitions about accelerated learning (e.g., the idea that it reduces remediation or time-to-degree) may not be borne out by more robust data. For example, do the credits accumulated by accelerated learning students ultimately speed the path to a credential or significantly improve postsecondary performance? The analyses and debates surrounding a culture of evidence strongly suggest that in most states, there are not enough conclusive data to confirm or challenge anecdote or policymaker or practitioner intuition.



WICHE's report, *Moving the Needle* is one of the few comprehensive attempts to answer some of the questions surrounding the financing of accelerated learning options. By focusing on four types of accelerated learning options and several states, the report describes the financial questions raised by various stakeholders involved in accelerated learning options, examines financing strategies that are used in selected states, and describes how financial analysis tools can be used to answer financial questions concerning the different options.

Organizational dynamics and system design surfaced early and often in the forum as a barrier to be overcome. In conversations about finance challenges, attendees and presenters frequently alluded to the silo effect, stemming from decentralized education governance. Recent analysis validates this concern, as Early College High Schools in states such as Rhode Island and Ohio illustrate the difficulties of spanning jurisdictional boundaries, due to concerns about “double dipping” and duplicate financing. Finance experts reinforced this, pointing out that these issues arise primarily because funds are allocated to institutions rather than to students. Emerging models (e.g., in Texas) indicate a shift toward a more student-driven funding approach.

The forum also brought equity in finance to the fore as a hurdle for accelerated learning to clear. Because a good deal of the resource base for accelerated learning is locally based, and because school districts present wide resource disparities, access to accelerated learning opportunities (especially to Advanced Placement and the International Baccalaureate) tends to be uneven. To the extent that promoting access to postsecondary education is a key objective for a state's accelerated learning program, presenters consistently cautioned that equity concerns must be substantially addressed. To that end, several states have taken or are considering policy changes that account for this.

Even though the conversation about financing accelerated learning tends to focus more on problems than solutions, the forum provided practitioners with a solid set of insights and exemplars for bringing policy up to speed with practice. The observations offered by forum presenters and recent research

coalesce around a handful of core principles:

- **Policymakers and education leaders must view a state's accelerated learning programming as a whole, not as a collection of individual parts.** While this can be difficult because of multiple (and often disparate) constituencies and funding streams, seeing each program as part of a broader strategy is essential for promoting opportunity and efficiency. One entity, preferably at the state level, should be the “keeper of the vision.”
- **States must have a plan to address funding equity issues pertaining to accelerated learning options across schools and districts.** Sustainable funding from a variety of sources (local, state, and federal) should be identified and tapped, particularly in the form of incentives for disadvantaged schools and students.
- **Working together, stakeholders must build a robust system of results measurement into their accelerated learning framework.** This includes financial metrics, such as return on investment, cost of completion, and net cost. Responsibility for this function—as with such matters as defining purpose and promoting equity—should be vested in a specific agency or entity (preferably at the state level), with annual reporting that links resources to results.

Case studies from Texas and Minnesota provided timely, concrete examples of policy initiatives that aim to fulfill these core principles. In both states, K-12 reform legislation served as the vehicle for promoting a stronger focus on accelerated learning. Through House Bill 1, Texas lawmakers have allocated up to \$275 per year for each eligible K-12 student to participate in accelerated learning programs. The legislation also extends state postsecondary student aid eligibility to these programs.

In Minnesota, the governor and legislators launched “Get Ready, Get Credit,” an initiative that adds significant state funding assistance for students participating in Advanced Placement, International

Baccalaureate, and the College Level Examination Program, as well as for the ACT's college-readiness assessment, the Educational Planning and Assessment System. The ACT initiative supplements a state's existing Postsecondary Education Options program, which is one of the oldest and most robust dual and concurrent enrollment programs in the nation.

Looking ahead, the biggest challenge for practitioners and policymakers alike will be to move the focus of finance conversations from the question of "How much?" to the question of "How?" Given leadership turnover and resource limitations, it is easy to see how broader, reform-oriented discussions can give way amid the annual scramble for appropriations. If accelerated learning programs are to exist on more than "budget dust," a more comprehensive, intentional, and evidence-based approach must become a statewide priority.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How should accelerated learning be framed and prioritized through state and local appropriations processes?
- How can states develop more comprehensive, integrated financing strategies for accelerated learning in the absence of overall K-12 or postsecondary reform initiatives?
- Which state-level entity should be charged with the coordination of accelerated learning policy, including mission and purpose, finance equity, and performance measurement?

## **THE ROAD FROM ATLANTA**

At the end, questions still remain. What did the forum accomplish? Did it advance the body of knowledge regarding the accelerated learning movement? Will the "border skirmishes" between K-12 and postsecondary education continue in this area? While these are questions without ready or simple answers, some preliminary conclusions emerge:

- **The forum succeeded in bringing together diverse constituencies (policymakers, practitioners, analysts,**

**and funders) to think across sector boundaries about the why, who, and how of accelerated learning.** Although the gathering did not resolve major points of debate (e.g., target populations, efficacy, quality assurance), these and other issues were more fully explored by a group of individuals with nationwide influence, which bodes well for advancing the movement. Follow-up, however, is the key variable. Too often in the education policy world, meetings such as this fail to catalyze change because momentum is not sustained.

- **The conference brought forward promising research and innovations in policy and practice around accelerated learning—accreditation, comprehensive finance strategies, and performance measurement, to name a few areas.**

The challenges here are those of significance and scalability. Can efforts profiled at the forum bring accelerated learning from the margins to the mainstream? Can they be broadly adapted and brought to scale? Until these questions are tackled, accelerated learning will remain a "neat idea," rather than an integral part of state education policy.

Then there are the final questions: What's next? And who's responsible for moving the agenda to that point? Following are a few recommended directions:

- **Build on the existing body of knowledge regarding the various accelerated learning approaches, developing primers and menus of policy options for political and education leaders and practitioners.** This is most effectively tackled by organizations with a national reach, such as the conference organizers WICHE and JFF, supported by constituents and the philanthropic community.
- **Establish a "culture of intentionality" that more fully integrates accelerated learning into state education policy agendas.** The heavy lifting here must be done at the state and local levels, catalyzed and supported by national organizations, such as the National

Governors Association (NGA), the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), and the Education Commission of the States (ECS).

- **Continue experimentation with and the development of a culture of evidence, widely disseminating new models and metrics in areas such as return on investment and program quality.** This work will be done at the local, state, and national levels, and support will require a coordinated, collaborative approach, led by a national organization or a coalition of national organizations (policy or philanthropic).
- **Develop and promote a cohesive set of regionally and nationally recognized quality assurance standards for all accelerated learning options.** Entities such as NACEP and the regional accrediting agencies are the most appropriate leaders here, supported and encouraged by national policymaker organizations (like NGA, NCSL, SHEEO, and ECS).

Accelerated learning, like many other policy innovations, holds considerable promise as a means of bridging gaps in a decentralized educational system. As other movements have shown, progressing from “promise identified” to “promise fulfilled” requires a commitment to experimentation (and the acceptance of some failure), continuous learning, and the will to challenge the status quo and entrenched interests. If accelerated learning is to evolve from a loosely defined concept illustrated by an anarchy of exemplars, this is the path that policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and funders must be prepared to take. It is the road from Atlanta, and the next steps await us.



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