

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY MAY 2023

THE LIGHT AWARDS AT 10 YEARS

Exploring the Impact of Investing in Teachers' Professional Learning

The [LIGHT Awards](#) provide support for professional learning projects initiated by teams of teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area with the aim of enhancing their instructional practices and leadership skills in areas they have identified as important. The two year, up to \$30,000 grants support the purposeful pursuit in an area *they* have identified as being important. In fact, **100% of teachers surveyed agreed it was important they were able to design their learning.**

The Intrepid Philanthropy [Foundation](#) commissioned a research study to assess the impact of the LIGHT Awards on teachers' professional growth as it prepares for its tenth year of administering the awards. The [full report](#) highlights findings from the research, provides profiles of select projects, and offers considerations for strengthening the award.

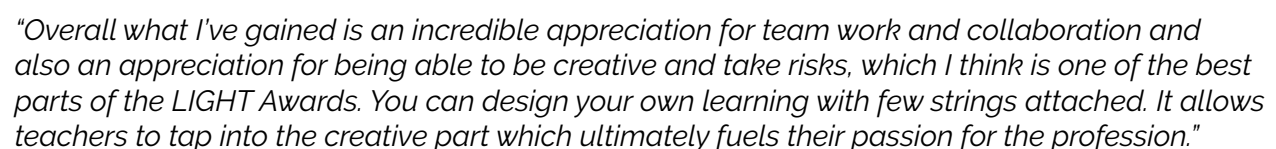
Ten key findings were identified through the analysis of research data that demonstrate the impact of the LIGHT Awards experience on participating educators. Considerable evidence supports the overall finding that:

The LIGHT Awards' investment in teachers' self-designed professional learning leads to professional and personal growth, deeper collegial connections, and an increase in professional skills and changes in instructional practices that positively impact students.

The study used a mixed-methods approach to gather comprehensive data about the impact of the LIGHT Awards grants on teachers' professional growth and development. The research inquiry focused in three areas: educator outcomes, team experiences, and project administration with the primary research question: In what ways did the LIGHT Awards experience contribute to teachers' growth and development?

The sample consisted of 350 teachers from 86 project teams who received grants between 2014-2022. The number of projects per year has ranged from five to thirteen. A total of 104 teachers (30% of the sample) representing 61 projects completed an online survey that included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The study also included 20 in-depth teacher interviews and three focus groups with project teams. The analysis comprises several methods, including descriptive statistics, regression analyses, and qualitative coding of open-ended questions.

The ten research findings paint a picture of great impact over the nine years of grant making. **Teachers expanded their professional skills, deepened their connections with colleagues, and many reported the experience helped them to navigate the challenges of the educational professional development and growth of teachers.** The study provides evidence of the model's success in enhancing teachers' capacity and fostering peer connections, and illustrates that professional growth and impact on students are deeply connected. Furthermore, the model's clear articulation suggests it is replicable in other geographic locations and with other private funders or school-based education foundations.

A quote from a teacher, presented in a white rounded rectangle against a dark background. The quote is: "Overall what I've gained is an incredible appreciation for team work and collaboration and also an appreciation for being able to be creative and take risks, which I think is one of the best parts of the LIGHT Awards. You can design your own learning with few strings attached. It allows teachers to tap into the creative part which ultimately fuels their passion for the profession."

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Educator Professional Growth & Development

The LIGHT Awards contributed to teachers' ability and motivation to improve instructional practice and to develop new curricular resources, greatly enhancing individual professional growth.

Evidence from the research data strongly supports the principle that investing in educators' self-designed professional learning impacts teachers' development. Survey and interview evidence suggests that the LIGHT Awards program was successful in fostering teachers' growth and development, as observed through four primary indicators: enhancing instructional practices; strengthening positive identity markers; boosting resilience and motivation to improve their craft; and building leadership capacity.

Finding #1: Teachers improved their instructional practices in self-identified areas of need and in ways that would not have been possible otherwise.

Finding #2: The LIGHT Awards experience had a significant positive impact on teachers' professional identities, with many reporting increased happiness, joy, and satisfaction in their work.

Finding #3: The LIGHT Awards experience inspired a renewed sense of purpose for several teachers, helping sustain them in challenging times and increasing their motivation to continue to improve their craft.

Finding #4: Teachers developed leadership skills and confidence through their projects, and for some this was a catalyst to expand their roles in and out of the classroom.



Made pedagogical changes in their teaching practice*



Report experiencing meaningful professional growth



Met self-identified professional learning needs



Report their team (or self) created a resource still in use



Report increasing their leadership skills



Moved into administrative roles after project participation

* Percentages reflect those who **agreed** or **strongly agreed** with the statement.

"I definitely gained confidence in teaching [my subject]. I felt joy and inspiration. I didn't feel that before. I have taught since 2000. At the beginning of my career, districts would send you to conferences and you would come back with a spark, surrounded by other educators interested in similar things. There is no funding for that anymore; teachers rarely get sent to conferences. Just having that training and feeling like 'I can do this; it is possible, there are a lot of other people out there doing the same things and feeling the same way' - It was a really special part of what this grant provided."

"I became such a better teacher; I feel so much more supported and competent by being able to bounce ideas and observe others. It didn't feel like I was spinning wheels on my own island anymore. I learned so much from the support; it launched me into a different level of teaching. I am so much better prepared to serve my students' needs."

"The LIGHT Awards allowed us to keep growing and developing as educators. We ask kids to always be open to growth and this helps keep us accountable for the same mindset."



Power of Collaboration

The LIGHT Awards provided teachers with a platform to engage with peers which fostered a sense of community and shared purpose that led to a great sense of accomplishment and increased project success.

Finding #5: Learning with and from colleagues was profoundly meaningful and contributed to the teachers' development.

Finding #6: Designing and implementing projects in collaboration with colleagues was a transformative experience for teachers, resulting in a great sense of collective accomplishment and fulfillment.

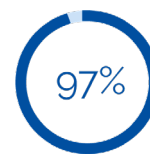
Finding #7: Site leadership can be an important asset for project success.

Awarding the grant to a team of teachers is an integral design aspect of the LIGHT Awards. Investing in teacher groups has the potential to lead to "broader and longer lasting impact" as a LIGHT Awards advisor noted. A key research question explored collaborative efforts: *To what extent was there a shared sense of purpose, accountability, and accomplishment and what contributed to it?* Evidence strongly points to the team aspect of the projects as being instrumental in both project success and individual teacher development. The collective experience was powerful for the majority of teams.

Teachers were asked to consider the ways in which site leadership, typically the principal, may have contributed to their project experiences. Leader support, when present, was helpful to elevate or buoy some projects. There were also a number of examples of little support or "at least s/he didn't get in the way."

"I was so lucky to be a part of this team. I learned a lot and elevated my teaching. I also grew stronger bonds with my team. My team had common goals and I was most impressed with how we pivoted with Covid and still met many goals and modified where necessary."

Working with colleagues is certainly not new in the teaching profession, yet there was something different about the collective experience of the teams who participated in LIGHT Awards projects. Many spoke about the "magic" of their team experience or how well they supported each other in and out of the work itself. For some, this seemed related to the nature of their projects, either in how they connected teachers across schools or created a vertical alignment within a school or between feeder schools in the same district.



Increased connection to their colleagues.*



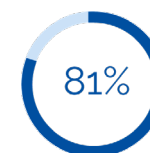
Report their team developed their professional practice as a community



Learned a great deal from colleagues through collaborative efforts



Worked cohesively and productively as a team to implement their project



Report a sense of accomplishment from the project.



Impact on Students

Educator professional growth is intertwined with student outcomes.

Finding #8: Teachers perceive that their professional growth positively affects students.

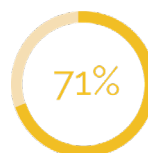
The main emphasis of the LIGHT Awards is on the professional development of teachers, without any explicit mandate to measure or report student outcomes. Both survey and interview data show, however, how strongly teachers connected their own development with student outcomes. Several teachers noted in interviews that their projects led to increased student engagement and learning, and survey data shows strong correlations as well.

Teachers who experienced worthwhile professional development also reported high ratings of positive impacts on their students and recognized the benefits of the project on their students. These correlations were found to be the strongest in the survey data. Additionally, teachers who reported implementing changes in their teaching practices were more likely to also report the positive influence of the project on their students.

"This is transforming our school and the way that we work together. For many years, the administration has emphasized more basic math and reading literacy, yet you can't do that if you don't have a community ready to learn if they are challenged with all of these inequities."



Report their project had a positive influence on students



Report their project had "a lot of impact" or "a great deal of impact" on their students

Teacher growth and student impact are intricately connected. These examples demonstrate not only the development of curriculum but also the pedagogical decisions made by teachers to directly connect their instruction with students' experiences, resulting in a deeper level of engagement.

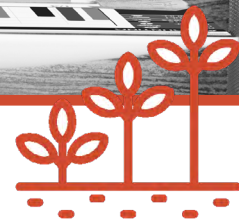
The Joy of Creating a Professional Learning Community Across Schools

Imagine teaching courses with no textbooks or curriculum, for a diverse group of students and without colleagues or other resources on campus. This was the case for a group of six experienced teachers who joined forces to strengthen and share their curriculum for Native Spanish speaking students. The educators in this 2015 cohort spanned four high schools across two districts. The students they teach are an extremely diverse population ranging from newcomers to students with advanced language proficiency. "We were desperate to help our students and ourselves," one teacher shared.

Recognizing this diversity and the sociopolitical factors that often undermine or ignore some groups, the teachers developed a more student centered curriculum that incorporates ideas of resilience, liberty, and pride with a social justice lens that would best serve their students' learning. Sharing curriculum and mutual support would support their own learning.

Over the two years of the grant, this group attended world language conferences together, observed each other's classes, developed new and revised existing curricular units, and created a high functioning professional learning community that went beyond their expectations. The impact of their collective efforts is profound: each educator expressed gaining skills, changing their instructional practice, and better meeting the needs of students. They also developed processes at their schools to better align students and course placement, advocated for differentiated class levels, and have presented at national conferences to spread their learning to others.

Supporting each other personally and professionally, increased confidence, deep connection, leadership development, and rigorous curriculum evolved out of their project. Each team member has expanded in their profession, some have moved into more formal leadership roles, and they all continue to build on the foundation established during their project experience. Now, several years later, this group continues to stay in touch to share materials and encouragement.



The LIGHT Awards Process, Engagement & Enduring Impacts

Effective administration of the LIGHT Awards contributed to its success and this form of capacity building leads to longer term impact.

Finding #9: The LIGHT Awards are a well developed model to support teacher professional growth and development.

Finding #10: The effects on teachers' professional growth from the LIGHT Awards continues past the completion of the grant projects.

The LIGHT Awards grants teams up to \$30,000 over two years to implement project plans. There is a high level of autonomy in determining project expenses, and teams are encouraged to think broadly on how best to support their professional learning. They may work with coaches and consultants, travel to conferences or other schools, purchase instructional materials, and/or submit meal reimbursement for meeting times.

"With the LIGHT Awards we were able to ask for money to do what we thought was best to create. The amount of money to spread out over two years allowed us to plan and set the cadence for working with our consultant. We were in charge of the work schedule for when we were released to plan together. We were able to adjust that over the two years. The whole take on it was impactful and powerful."

Overall, teachers report high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of their engagement. When asked to reflect on their various interactions with the LIGHT Awards team, teachers rated their experiences very highly overall. The funds typically are dispersed to the school or district to be accessed by the teachers; individual teachers are not paid directly for their time but can be awarded a modest stipend. For some, this third-party entity has smooth procedures (PTA's or education funds being the smoothest), while others involve several procedural steps and potential problems.

Supporting teachers' professional learning, as the previous research findings suggest, greatly impacted teachers in their instructional practices, deepened their connections with colleagues, and affected students in a variety of ways. Data also points to

impacts that extend to others at their schools. Data analysis reveals three distinct ways in which the longer-term effects of the program were observed: first, through the dissemination of project learnings towards greater use; second, through the curricular resources or physical spaces that remained after grant completion; and third, through the enduring relationships that were strengthened during the program.

"The impact is enormous on our entire school. Not only were there the five of us teachers who went on this journey but we work with our grade level partners... It's now across the whole school. We've all started to teach this way... That is really powerful and so great to see across the grade levels."

The data unequivocally demonstrates that building connections with fellow teachers played a crucial role in the impact of the LIGHT Awards experience on teachers and is likely to have a lasting impact.

"The closer connection I built with my colleagues [added to my sense of joy]. On our team - I knew a few of them well at the beginning, and I didn't know the other three as well. It just really improved that collegiality. It makes it more of a joy to come to work when you know your colleagues better. It brings joy into having a better sense of community."

By fostering enduring relationships, producing valuable resources, and effectively sharing project learning, the LIGHT Awards have had a significant impact on the professional development of teachers, enabling them to enact positive changes in their classrooms and schools.

"This was the professional learning that we were all interested in. It wasn't a top down type of professional development. It was 'what did we as a group want for all of us to develop as teachers?' It wasn't 'let's look at student data to back up a claim our district is trying to promote.' It was integrating skills. It was teacher driven and teacher interest. It was powerful. I learned so much. My students come to me and love the lessons. That's why I stay (in the profession). I would not have had the bandwidth to do this on my own. I definitely got inspired by the projects."



Considerations

The ten research findings paint a picture of great impact over the nine years of grant making. Teachers expanded their professional skills, deepened their connections with colleagues, and many reported positive influences of their experiences on the students they teach. Areas for strengthening and sustaining effects are offered here.

- **Teamwork matters:** Continue to invest in developing professional practice communities and emphasizing effective communication within the team, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and a well-planned implementation process that contributes to successful teamwork.
- **Better coordination with the fiscal entity would reduce challenges:** Consider ways to support teams' navigation around using their funds.
- **Teacher pay and substitute teaching shortage was a limiting factor:** Examine how best to support effective use of time in projects.
- **Considering project priorities may increase impact:** By design, the funded projects of the LIGHT Awards are quite diverse. Consider the importance of project scopes to the Foundation's efforts.
- **There is desire for continued engagement with the LIGHT Awards:** Explore expanding ways to connect awardees to each other and the Foundation for deeper impact.

Conclusion

Numerous teachers cited their participation in the LIGHT Awards program as a highlight of their careers, and as an experience that has helped sustain them during challenging times in their profession and lives. These teachers credit the experience with providing them with a renewed sense of purpose and direction in their teaching, as well as the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and pursue projects that aligned with their passions and interests. **Overall, the LIGHT Awards grant had a positive and lasting impact on the teachers involved and helped them to navigate the challenges of the educational landscape with greater resilience and optimism.** An important standout from the Awards experience is how much these professional development opportunities differed from those provided (if at

all) from schools or districts. The vast majority of the projects would not have been funded by their respective schools or districts, either due to a lack of resources or not being considered a high enough priority.

The professional learning opportunities afforded to teachers through the LIGHT Awards permeated their teaching practices and their relationships with colleagues and students. For the vast majority, the experience met an underlying desire for a self-designed autonomous project that in turn, became a major inflection point in many of the teachers' careers. The opportunity to design one's own learning experience, alongside chosen colleagues, was particularly noteworthy and was viewed as an extraordinary opportunity by many of the teachers involved in the study.

The overall sentiment from teachers has been gratitude for the award experience, and even more so for the deep respect they felt. Several noted the opportunity given to reflect on their practice and personal beliefs, and most of all to connect with other educators in a structured, collaborative way with the resources to explore new practices. This teachers sums up the theme heard from many others,

"The LIGHT Award was the best experience in my entire teaching career. I had been teaching for more than 25 years when our team received this award. My team was all in on the purpose which was to provide more project-based learning opportunities for our students. This led to our team leading the school in PD's and learning opportunities and providing better makerspace student projects with our team collaboration times and participation."

As the findings of this research study illustrate, the LIGHT Awards model is well-crafted and when well-executed, effectively supports the professional development and growth of teachers. The study provides evidence of the model's success in enhancing teachers' capacity and fostering peer connections, and illustrates that professional growth and impact on students are deeply connected. Furthermore, the model's clear articulation suggests it is replicable in other geographic locations and with other private funders or school-based education foundations.