



THE LIGHT AWARDS AT 10 YEARS

Exploring the Impact of Investing in
Teachers' Professional Learning

May 2023

Report prepared by
Jennifer Curry Villeneuve, Ph.D.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
Inquiry Design.....	4
Summary of Findings.....	5
Educator Professional Growth & Development.....	6
Project Profile 1: The Joy of Creating a Professional Learning Community Across Schools.....	10
Power of Collaboration.....	11
Project Profile 2: Making Math Fun!.....	15
Impact on Students.....	16
Project Profile 3: Bringing History to Life through More Inclusive Content.....	18
The LIGHT Awards Process, Engagement, & Enduring Impacts.....	19
Project Profile 4: Transforming Middle School Education Through Integrated STEAM Pathways.....	23
Considerations.....	24
Conclusion.....	26
Acknowledgements.....	27



Introduction

The LIGHT Awards are the flagship program of the Intrepid Philanthropy [Foundation](#), a private family foundation with the mission of “*seeding innovation in education.*” With the intent to “*invest in teachers,*” the LIGHT Awards grants are driven by the belief that “*highly effective, engaged teachers are the most important factor in a student’s academic experience and success. We seek to honor and invest in educators and school leaders*”

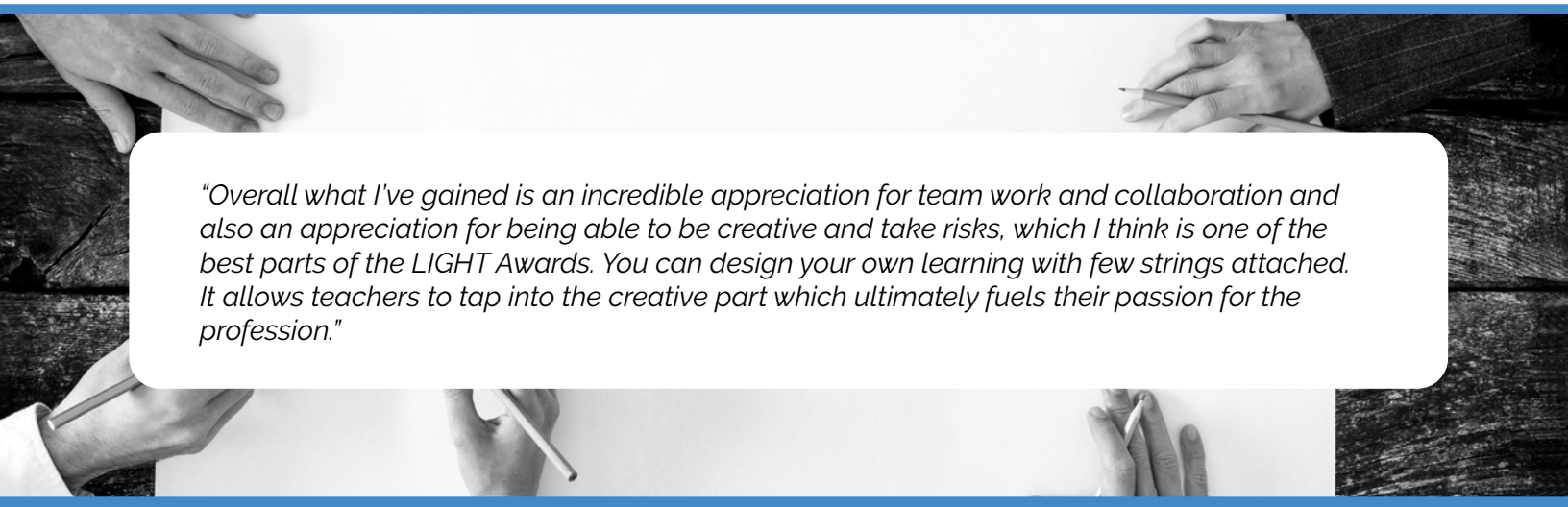
Two year professional development grants are awarded to teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area upon selection after a competitive application process. The award is designed to support the purposeful pursuit, by a team of teachers over two years, to learn and improve instructional practice in an area *they* have identified as being important. The teams are granted up to \$30,000 to use for their learning project. What sets this opportunity apart from school or district professional development, and what teachers commented on most frequently when asked what was “intrepid” about the experience, is the central tenet that this is *teacher*-designed professional learning. Teachers create their projects, apply as a team directly to the Foundation and are responsible for all aspects of implementation. In fact, 100% of the teachers surveyed agreed it was important that they were able to design their own project.

Consistent with one of its core values, *continuous 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

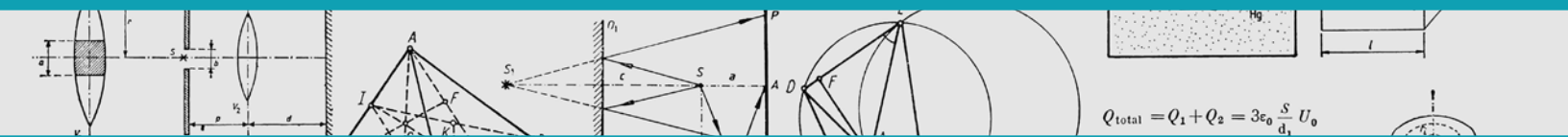
the awards. This report highlights findings from the research, provides profiles of select projects (past profiles are available on the LIGHT Awards [website](#)), and offers considerations for strengthening the award. The Foundation’s other core values of *respect, collaboration, best practice, leverage,* and *innovation* serve as important context in the research design and analysis. The resulting findings demonstrate a strong adherence to these values, emphasizing their importance in facilitating effective teacher professional growth and support.

The LIGHT Awards have been created to provide support for professional learning projects initiated by teams of teachers, with the aim of enhancing their instructional practices and leadership skills in areas they have identified as important. This report lays out the research methods used to gather data, highlights ten significant findings, and offers considerations for moving forward. 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.



“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.”



Inquiry Design

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. Starting with a review of awarded projects over the nine cohorts and gathering the perspectives of the Intrepid Philanthropy Foundation advisors, key inquiry questions were identified to frame data collection. The research inquiry focused in three areas: educator outcomes, team experiences, and project administration, leading to the primary research questions:

- **Educator Outcomes:** *In what ways did the LIGHT Awards experience contribute to teachers' growth and development?*
- **Team Experiences:** *To what extent was there a shared sense of purpose, accountability, and accomplishment and what contributed to it?*
- **Projects:** *How did the nature of the project, site support, and the award itself contribute to the overall LIGHT Awards professional learning experience?*

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 survey covered topics such as team collaboration, project details, professional learning experiences, and engagement with the LIGHT Awards team. Respondents represented a range of projects and cohort years. To supplement the survey data, the study also included 20 in-depth interviews with teachers chosen from those who indicated their willingness to participate (n=60 possible interviewees). The interviews were conducted with teachers from different school levels (elementary, middle, or high school), with varying levels of teaching experience, and representing a range of cohort years. Focus groups with three project teams were conducted for the project profiles. Survey participants were entered into a raffle to win \$25 gift cards, while those who participated in interviews and focus groups received similar gift cards as a token of appreciation for their time.

The analysis comprises several methods, including descriptive statistics, regression analyses, and qualitative coding of open-ended questions. These approaches were used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data and provide insights into the research questions. Descriptive statistics were utilized to summarize the survey responses, while the regression analyses were employed to investigate the relationship between different variables. The qualitative coding of open-ended questions and interview transcripts aimed to identify patterns and themes in the respondents' comments and opinions. Quotes from both the survey and interviews are used throughout the report that exemplify research findings.

The survey results indicate that LIGHT Awards participants were highly satisfied with their experiences overall. The mean of most responses to Likert-type questions (on a scale of 1 to 5) was between 4.25 and 4.75, demonstrating a high degree of positivity. The overall enthusiasm of respondents was reflected in their responses to a wide range of questions. Despite the overall positivity of responses, some questions correlated more closely than others. The variations within individual respondent's results suggest that some respondents may have answered neutral or less positively on certain questions while responding "strongly agree" on others. This indicates that the survey respondents were thoughtful and deliberate in their answers, thus adding to the reliability and validity of the methods.





Findings

Ten key findings were identified through the analysis of research data that demonstrate the impact of the LIGHT Awards experience on participating educators. These findings are organized into four distinct sections, starting with the effects on teachers, followed by those resulting from the team experience, impacts on students, and culminating in evidence about the administration of the award and some lasting effects.

Educator Professional Growth & Development



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 as a result of their involvement.

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.

Power of Collaboration



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.

Impact on Students



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

The LIGHT Awards Process, Engagement & Enduring Impacts



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.



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.

The research, like the LIGHT Awards itself, centers on the experience of teachers as the primary focus of the inquiry, asking: *In what ways did the LIGHT Awards experience contribute to teachers' growth and development?*

Evidence from the research data strongly supports the principle that investing in educators' self-designed professional learning impacts teachers' development. Almost all of the teachers (97%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *"I experienced meaningful professional growth as a result of doing the project."* Survey and interview data dive into what meaningful professional growth looks like and how the awards contributed to it. The evidence collected 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. Each is shared as a finding below.

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

Projects encompassed a wide range of topics and approaches to learning, including those focused on developing new curriculum, learning new pedagogical strategies, or more general capacity building efforts:

- ▶ English language learners
- ▶ Reading across the curriculum
- ▶ Social and emotional learning
- ▶ Anti-racist curriculum
- ▶ Project-based learning
- ▶ Mentoring new teachers
- ▶ Interdisciplinary literacy
- ▶ Design thinking

Many of the teachers shared that their opportunities for professional development were quite limited, and when they did exist, they were typically a 'sit and get' or a one time training dictated by school or district mandates. The professional learning teachers experienced through their LIGHT Awards projects was a significant departure from previous experiences, and for many was the key to their ability to effect instructional change. A sentiment often repeated was how few opportunities exist today for professional learning, as this teacher explains:

"Our district does not pay for us to receive professional development. If not for this grant, we would still be teaching how we learned in credential school, 20+ years ago."

Almost all (98%) teachers surveyed report they *'Made pedagogical changes in [my] teaching practice.'* Asked to explain how the LIGHT Awards experience impacted their professional growth, the most frequently cited response (45% of open-ended responses to that question) related to changing instructional practice. These shifts involved new strategies learned through the conferences, trainings, coaching sessions, or observing colleagues' practices that the LIGHT Awards projects enabled. Some even compared their experiences as learners to those of their students.

"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."

Furthermore, in the teacher interviews, several spoke of being more intentional in their instructional practice as a result of their projects.

"I'm more reflective about my practice, I put into words why I do things the way I do, why I run my classroom or lessons the way that I do."



The grant provided time to work together and with consultants or coaches in ways that increased teachers' ability to incorporate new practice.

"It is so difficult to actually implement the great ideas that you learn at conferences or in reading while in the midst of teaching full time. The LIGHT Awards allowed us to take some days away from teaching to plan for implementation of and reflection on new strategies."

Teachers also highlighted gaining specific content knowledge or gaining new skills. Several were able to complete certifications or levels of training that enabled them to train other teachers and/or use their new skills in their classrooms. Almost all (95%) agreed or strongly agreed that their self-identified professional learning needs were met.

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 as a result of their involvement.

Many teachers pointed to their experience as LIGHT Awards participants as being reinvigorating and adding to their well-being, sense of fulfillment, and even increasing their engagement in their work. The ability to pursue personally meaningful learning with chosen colleagues appears to have had a positive impact on teacher happiness or work satisfaction.

The second most frequently mentioned in the open-ended comments related to how the experience enhanced a teacher's professional identity. Numerous teachers expressed feeling a profound sense of respect from the LIGHT Awards team and found the overall experience to be a significant departure from their typical on-campus experiences. Being recognized as professionals by receiving the grant, and especially the LIGHT Awards team, showed up throughout the research data as being particularly significant to teachers. For several, like this teacher, the experience inspired great enthusiasm and appreciation.

"I am thriving right now! I'm able to bring the joy, my joy of learning into the space. I'm part of this. That's part of my thriving - I'm showing up as me and I'm unafraid to do so... I'm so grateful I was able to do this. I am extremely indebted to the LIGHT Awards."

Feeling valued by the experience was a common theme in the data:

"It created space for our team to collaborate and honestly, made me feel like I was a professional. I felt respected by the LIGHT Awards team and felt that my work was valued. It felt like a grant that centered teachers and not just student output."

Teachers who participated in a LIGHT Awards project continue to grow from the experience in part because they were able to tap into something important to them and were provided with the resources to pursue it. As this teacher explains it working for her,

"It was my jumpstart! Often someone will have the passion but not the resources. Some people have resources but no passion. This was both for me!"

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.

Several teachers report the grant experience was a career highlight that influenced their curiosity and awareness about both pedagogy and curriculum. The ability to explore new ways of meeting students' needs was energizing. At the same time, several teachers expressed in both the survey and interviews significant challenges working in schools and the teaching profession in general, especially in the past few years. Their projects, especially working with colleagues in this way, were bright spots.

"I definitely gained confidence in teaching (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."



In addition to the ability to learn and grow in their chosen professions, and the experience of their projects affirming their sense of professionalism, several teachers felt the added value from being awarded the grant. As this teacher explains:

"The culture of care and honoring teachers changed my perspective about the profession. Nobody honors teachers in the way you all do, and it increases how seriously we all take our work and professionalism to be treated as valued and valuable professionals."

As the first research finding reveals, teachers report that the experiences bolstered their professional toolkit, particularly in response to the changing demands of teaching, including technological changes. For example, a number of projects focused on the development of fundamental literacy in language arts, mathematics, or science curricula and the pedagogical strategies required for effective implementation. Beyond adding to their instructional practices, the opportunities themselves to access cutting-edge best practice training and work with expert coaches in the field fundamentally transformed the experiences of the teachers, leading to a renewed sense of purpose and satisfaction in their profession. This is important to note as several teachers mentioned in the survey and interviews how isolating teaching can be and how devastating public opinion that denigrates teachers has felt in recent years.

For some teachers, the particular focus of their projects re-engaged them in their professional purpose:

"(The) LIGHT Awards became a vehicle for me to grow my passion and stay on my path and journey to becoming an anti-racist educator and leader. I am indebted to LIGHT Awards for this unique opportunity, especially because I have grown a greater sense of confidence and resilience to do the work."

The LIGHT Awards experience was also catalyzing for some educators in their career journeys. As this teacher turned administrator shares,

"Wholeheartedly for me, not just the project but the LIGHT Awards completely fueled a passion to serve and meet the needs of my students. Just the growth and student product as a direct piece of our collaboration was the validation I needed to keep working hard and keep doing what we're doing. [My team colleagues] propped me up and made me a better teacher and really launched me into more areas of my career."

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.

The LIGHT Awards had a positive impact on some teachers' career journeys towards more leadership and administration roles. Three quarters (75%) of survey respondents report increasing their leadership skills as a result of their project. One quarter (25%) moved into administrative roles after project participation, though it is not clear from the data if this was a direct link to their LIGHT Awards experience. However, many reported a sense of increased confidence and influence from their experience. Teachers who gained new confidence in their ability to effect instructional change also report having a sense of accomplishment, report that they grew professionally, and say their project experience was impactful.

Overall, the results suggest that the LIGHT Awards had a positive impact on some teachers' leadership aspirations and contributed to their professional growth. For example, by taking on new challenges, some teachers felt more confident than before to present at conferences, share in formal and informal settings with colleagues, and/or add their voice to schoolwide discourse, all of which were deeply fulfilling for them.

"In the beginning my identity was 'I'm just a teacher' - being part of the process and grant I've realized I'm more than that. I'm the leader of my students, and in this collaboration effort, I'm able to bounce ideas off other teachers and talk about what works for me and what doesn't. I'm able to share if someone is struggling. We all listen to each other. We all own a bit of the leadership position in the process."

For some teachers, this was their first opportunity to develop leadership skills and to begin to affect change more broadly in their schools.

"I had never been in a leadership role before this grant project. I gained a lot of confidence throughout the process."

"This experience has given me more confidence in seeking out educational best practices on my own and being more vocal in presenting them to our admin and staff."



The grants are particularly attractive to experienced teachers; 73% of survey respondents had been teaching for more than nine years at the time of their award. Experienced teachers want to learn and develop. They report a clear sense of the "gap" or need in either pedagogical practice or curriculum (or both). In the interviews, several teachers spoke about the opportunity to expand the ways they supported colleagues through the leadership aspects of their projects and to use their social capital to make continuous learning a more widely held value on campus. As this former teacher, now vice principal shares,

"I'm so appreciative of the fact that [the project] started me down a path of leadership. I have been able to take it wider. I've been in a lot of different classrooms that are slowly changing. I see it spread."

While research data points strongly to the ways the LIGHT Awards experience contributed to these four aspects of professional growth and development, teachers also expressed some challenges in their project journeys. Most frequently identified was time to devote to their projects which for the vast majority were above and beyond regular responsibilities. The severe shortage of access to qualified substitute teachers hampered several teachers' ability to observe colleagues (in or out of their school), to attend conferences, and to collaborate with their team. Challenges related to managing the grant are included in a later section.



Made pedagogical changes in their teaching practice*



Met self-identified professional learning needs



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

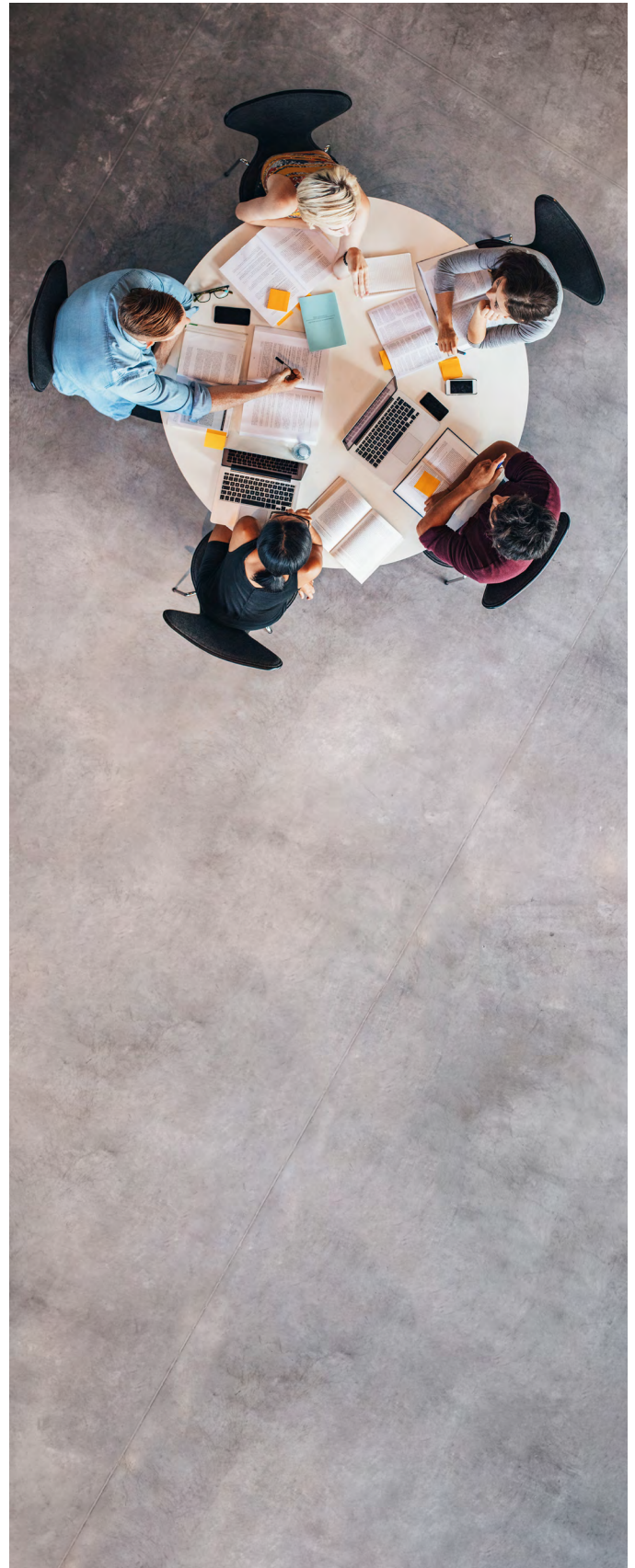


Report increasing their leadership skills



Moved into administrative roles after project participation

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



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 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.

"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."

"In 25 years of teaching, this has been a collaboration highlight."



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.

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. While working with peers may add to project complexity through team dynamic challenges and time constraints related to balancing project tasks with teaching responsibilities, teachers were extremely positive about their team experiences. 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. It also reveals how administrative leadership involvement (or the lack of) affects the process and completion of projects.

Participants rated their team experience quite positively; collaborating with colleagues was a major driver of professional growth. Many spoke of how the experience fundamentally changed them. Three aspects of the team experiences stand out: Learning together, feeling a sense of collective accomplishment, and sharing learning with others.

There are two findings that highlight how the team experience impacted teachers' experiences: 1) learning together and 2) the transformational aspects of collective accomplishment. A third finding considers site leadership's role in professional learning.

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

To what extent did the team develop as a community of practice while learning together, and how did this affect teachers individually? As this research question implies, providing resources for teachers

to focus together on an educational pursuit has the potential for strengthening how they learn from each other and continue to engage after the project's completion. Evidence from the survey and interviews confirms this and indicates how impactful this aspect of the experience was for teachers. When asked about the most meaningful aspect of their LIGHT Awards experience, most teachers' comments fell in the category of 'learning with colleagues'. Almost all (96%) report their team developed their professional practice as a community. Similarly, 94% report they learned a great deal from colleagues through the collaborative efforts. Interview data supports this as teachers shared how their experiences led to the exchange of instructional practices, discussion of best practices, development and implementation of new curricula, and the generative discourse around their projects. Learning with and from colleagues was highly impactful.

“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.”

Projects that incorporated peer observation emerged as especially significant. In some instances, teachers visited other schools to observe their peers in what were often different teaching environments (student population or course material), while in other cases, they observed colleagues within their own school. Regardless of the setting, all of the teachers who participated in peer observation emphasized the valuable insights they gained from the experience. Additionally, several teachers noted the personal significance of opening their classrooms (and student work) and teaching strategies to their colleagues, recognizing the profound contribution this made to their professional growth.



As this teacher shares,

"That was really interesting and exciting. Normally we wouldn't be given money to get a sub to see a teacher at another school. To see diverse schools - a wide, wide range - made me see different approaches to teaching. It gave me ideas for my own classroom. Really powerful experience."

For one project team, the observations were embedded in conferences hosted at school sites they attended that they would not otherwise have had access to, and that in subsequent years they returned to present their learning. As this teacher shares,

"That's the best PD ever - to observe others in the country or state. Seeing what they're doing has been really powerful."

Having a shared purpose added value to the process of learning together. Being united in a focus, according to teachers, boosted their efforts. Several team members expressed variations of this sentiment:

"Our team was all on board to learn and grow from our project. We all had the same level of excitement for the topic of our professional development and really saw the value in working together to be able to share what we learned with our students."

Pandemic disruptions

The global pandemic disrupted schools in numerous ways. Whether their project was in process during the pandemic or before, several teachers mentioned its effects in the survey. Four of the nine cohorts of LIGHT Awardees were directly affected (projects starting in 2019, 2020, 2021 & 2022). For some it was highly disruptive to their plans, and for others their teams and/or projects were able to adapt to changing conditions. Almost half (46%) of teachers in all cohorts surveyed report their projects were affected by the pandemic. Notably, of those who said their project was affected, more than half (55%) agreed or strongly agreed that *"the LIGHT Awards was a bright spot for me and/or my team during the pandemic."* A few projects were unable to continue or were substantially revised as a result as well. One teacher shared how her project imploded:

"Three out of five of the team left teaching during the pandemic, and we had some administrators who were in charge of the money who also left. The actual conferences were canceled and there was a sub shortage. This was a very difficult project during the pandemic."

For others whose projects had already concluded when schools went to remote learning, they were able to use some of the lessons learned to adapt practices to better support their students.

"Coming back from the pandemic, students needed to relearn how to work collaboratively. I believe we were better able to meet the needs of all students because of techniques learned through our LIGHT Awards funded PD."

Despite the need for teachers to adapt their project activities from in-person to online, there were some innovative efforts to maintain the collaborative essence of the project. For instance, one teacher recounted how attending a 2019 conference in New York had transformed their team through content learning, exploration of a new city together, and numerous meaningful conversations. When the follow-up conference went virtual the following year, the team utilized grant funds to stay together in a rental house a few hours away. They attended the conference in individual rooms and came together to discuss and plan how they would use the information. Although not the same as an in-person conference, this modified experience significantly augmented their capacity to learn collaboratively and to continue to strengthen their bonds.

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.

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. Evidence suggests the mutual support added considerably to their sense of self as educators, sustained them during challenging



times, and improved their ability to serve their students. It often seemed to relate 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. Examples of projects and the ways in which they enhanced teachers' professional growth in their teams are explored below.

Projects that spanned schools and/or districts were particularly interesting in both their impacts and vision. Some connected teachers in particularly isolated disciplines with peers at other schools (e.g. music, language, arts integration). In such cases, the projects have been a lifeline for the team members. They created community, camaraderie, and much improved resources to use with students.

"I have these really amazing colleagues and connections now. We will share things with one another and we're so proud of what our students did or said. With them I'll say: 'No one else in the school will understand it. I can reach out to you to share this.'"

Connecting teams at schools that ultimately serve the exact same students also stands out for its capacity building effects. One such project started at the middle school and expanded in the second year to include teachers at the high school in order to vertically align mathematics education.

"The grant allows us to have the conversations with the high school teachers we just weren't able to do before."

This also extended to high school teachers at the same school who typically did not meet outside of their department teams, and even then the focus tended to be on subject matter learning not pedagogy. In this LIGHT Awards project, a team of teachers from different disciplines aimed to improve reading across the curriculum. Their interactions led to significant insights, as this teacher shares,

"The reading work we were doing - reading was defined in a lot of ways. Math teachers - what does it look like in math? It could be reading a triangle. The English teacher raised her hand and asked me about the periodic table. That was a huge lightbulb moment for me. I taught it as content, not something that I needed to teach them to read. It changed my perspective on teaching - how much information is in there, how beautiful it is in science. It gave me a new way of approaching something in my discipline."

"I'm a content teacher, but also a teacher of reading as a science teacher. I had to wonder how to approach this super important diagram in my subject area. It was a lightbulb moment. If we had not all been in that room, it would not have happened. It was such an epiphany and really valuable still all these years later."

By supporting cross-school collaboration and covering expenses to travel to other sites, the LIGHT Awards have been critical in coordinating curriculum alignment that can ultimately benefit students.

Teachers expressed a great sense of accomplishment and pride from their projects and the overall experience. The vast majority (81%) report 'a lot' or 'a great deal' of pride in their LIGHT Awards project work. Furthermore, a similar percentage (81%) report a sense of accomplishment from the project. The survey data also reveals a cluster of highly correlated responses related to team dynamics and cooperation on the project. The participants who believed that their teams were effective on one dimension also perceived their team to be effective on other dimensions. Similarly, teams that felt they were ineffective in one way were also likely to self assess as ineffective in other ways. The highest correlations were found between questions related to team accomplishments, professional practice development, team communication, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and the planning process. The strongest correlations (listed from highest to lowest) among these were between questions of the:

- sense of accomplishment and cohesive and productive teamwork (R=0.804*),
- clarity of roles and responsibilities and project planning (R=0.746),
- sense of accomplishment and developing a professional practice community (R=0.738),
- team communication and feeling more connected to colleagues (R=0.734),
- clarity of roles and responsibilities and team communication (R=0.720).

These findings suggest that team dynamics play a crucial role in project success, and that participants perceived effective teamwork to be essential for achieving project goals. Effective collective experience was reported to be important.

*R values, or correlation coefficients, indicate the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables. An R value above .7 represents a significant and strong positive relationship, meaning that the variables are consistently and reliably associated with each other.



For many teachers, the LIGHT Awards experience was deeply transformative.

"Best Teacher Development ever! We actually were able to do a vertical look from middle school to high school for the first time ever in my teaching career of 37 years."

For some project teams, collaboration also involved administrative support.

As stated earlier, the LIGHT Awards are unique in their focus on teacher-designed, team lead, professional learning. Award criteria are clear that projects must be teachers' ideas, not that of a principal or site leader.

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

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 nominal support or *"at least s/he didn't get in the way."* At a minimum, a site leader must sign a letter of support in the application process. For half of the survey respondents, this basic step was all their site leader did. For the others, the most frequently cited sentiment was receiving general encouragement, followed by release time or other resources (purchasing curriculum or equipment), and providing opportunities to share with others at the school. A number of teachers mentioned in the open-ended responses a variation of appreciating that their principals *"trusted us and our process."*

In general, there was not a strong statistical correlation between principal support of projects and other areas of the survey. That is, whether a principal was a school-wide advocate for a project or not had little bearing on things like 'sense of teamwork', 'professional growth', or teachers' perception of impact. This could be due to the large variation in site support among the projects, thus its inconclusive to determine the necessity of leadership support for teachers' growth and development. For many teams, however, the principal's support was credited with wider adoption or longer lasting impact of project work that had the potential to spread on campus. As this teacher shares,

"My principal/site leader was incredibly helpful throughout the project, always putting the project's goals and objectives first. This made a big difference in keeping everyone on the same page and motivated, and in overcoming any obstacles we encountered along the way."

Learning and working together contributed to teachers' professional growth and development as these findings illustrate. Furthermore, extending that collaboration to others at their school sites, whether fellow educators or through site leaders, points to greater impact and sustainability



Increased connection to their colleagues.*



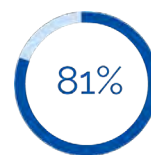
Report their team developed their professional practice as a community



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.

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

Making Math Fun!

Shifting mindsets opened the door to connection and inspired a love of learning at this elementary school serving a diverse population of about 400 students in kindergarten to fifth grade. About 60% of the student population come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and 80% are students of color, with a significant portion being English Language Learners. The school has two classes at each grade level. A cohort of teachers recognized the need to change their approach to teaching math so they could better support their students' learning and reduce achievement gaps.

Inspired by leading mathematician Jo Boaler who teaches about mathematical mindsets and the work of researcher Carol Dweck on growth mindsets, the team applied for a LIGHT Awards grant to learn the brain development-based methods to approach teaching math differently and make it more fun and explorative. Driven by the belief that Boaler shares that 'all people can be math people', the five teachers embarked on a two year mission to change their practices to inspire their students' learning by investing in their own.

Professional learning included attending workshops and conferences together that opened the teachers' hearts and inspired their minds to what was possible. Lesson planning sessions, collaborative problem solving, and access to integrated coaching would have otherwise been too challenging or expensive. The principal allocated additional funds for more time with the external coach in support of this work which led to changes across the entire school community as the teachers were able to share their lesson planning and insights with their grade level counterparts.

Five years since the project began, math has become many students' favorite time of day across the grade levels, and a particularly engaging experience for teachers too who report increased engagement and fewer behavioral issues. The focus on shifting mindsets about learning math has extended to other areas too. "We just don't hear students say 'I can't...' on campus; they have embraced possibilities." The shift has been nothing short of profound.

"We have found a new way for students to fall in love with math... Math is so fun to teach when it's student driven... When I ask kids what their favorite time of day is, I get 80% who love math. They are sad when it's over. It's all about math games and interacting with each other."

"(Shifting mindsets) has opened the doorway to connect with kids and bring down the anxiety and worry that they have. It has increased connections about making mistakes. It has helped me connect with them throughout the day. It helps to connect when they're struggling and what I need to do to get them where they need to be."



Impact on Students

Educator professional growth is intertwined with student outcomes.

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. One finding related to student outcomes is shared here.

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

Teachers who experienced impactful 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. Reviewing how the questions relate to each other, the highest correlations were found between the questions:

- *'impact on oneself [professionally]' and 'positive influence on the students taught'* (R=0.744), and
- *'impact on oneself [professionally]' and 'impact on students'* (R=0.699).



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

These findings suggest that teachers view their professional growth, in part, in terms of their influence on their students.

Projects with a social justice or equity focus stand out in the data as being particularly meaningful for both teachers and students. In such cases, focusing on equity and diverse populations met personal and professional goals for the teachers. The ability to dive deeper into what it means to design curriculum for a more diverse student population or to examine one's own implicit biases added to teachers' growth. One teacher whose team read a book about social justice-informed pedagogy shared,

"The big thing for me was - I feel like I'm going to cry - having a book that talked about a lot of things I've been doing that I feel very lonely doing. I often want to quit teaching. Doing things in the arena of ethnic studies and social justice, when you focus that way, it changes how you structure lessons and changes priority. Reading that book with others who care and want to do that work, it just was pretty profound for me."

While developing lessons for students was a product of this project, what was most valuable for this teacher was the process of engaging with like-minded teachers. Similarly for a teacher who worked with colleagues at different schools, lifting her from her "island" led to a deep sense of accomplishment in her work as well as big growth in her students. She explains how student work improved drastically in the year after her project:

"I can wholeheartedly say that the year after the LIGHT Awards and what [students] could do... was night and day. My sense of pride too, the validation for the hard work we were putting in. Students were benefiting from it. That's what I needed to see... I wouldn't have been able to do it without the support of the award. [Student] output was so much better."

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



Another project with an equity lens involved different elementary grade level teachers and the school librarian to address three related needs: time to plan and develop ethnic studies and service-learning lessons; opportunities to observe each other's teaching to inform their own; and continuing their own development about anti-racist teaching and learning to better serve kids at their diverse school. As the teacher notes,

"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."

Engaging in the work together with support from an expert consultant led in a short amount of time to increased intentionality throughout the school and a shift in priorities by the principal who subsequently created a whole school framework based on the team's initial work.

As part of another project, a teacher created video lessons featuring his students (with their permission) for use in new teacher education. He shared how few resources were available to him as a new teacher and how his team's project was directly addressing the gap. In the lessons he developed, the students saw themselves as model students with significance and influence, and this realization seemed to have a profound impact on their self-esteem. As the teacher stated,

"They had never thought of themselves as capable of being such exceptional students."

An elementary school teacher shared a similar sentiment:

"I was a special educator and I was in a self contained class. Typically the students in those classes don't have a lot of access to general education curriculum or even their peers... What brought me joy and satisfaction was that my kids got to serve as the model for the rest of the school. My kids were blossoming as I was strengthening my skills. My special ed kids could write circles around the gen ed kids. One of the most satisfying pieces was they got to be included and serve as a model for the rest of the population. It challenges people's perspectives - adults and kids... of what these kids could do and what they deserved to do. It was great professional learning and I'm better and different because of it. The most joyful thing was that my kids, without the same level of education experience, got to thrive during all this."

Numerous projects focused on curriculum development with the goal of improving the connection between students and the material. Teachers created lessons or provided resources that reflected their students' experiences, especially for those from historically underrepresented communities. For instance, an elementary school's social studies curriculum used picture books with more inclusive and comprehensive historical explanations, resulting in deeper conversations and inquiries among students about whose voices are often excluded.

Another project expanded the school library to include "literature that creates mirrors, windows and glass sliding doors," resulting in increased student engagement, as students made connections between what they read and their own lives. The teacher shared how meaningful it was to hear a student say, "That girl looks like me!"

Additionally, a middle school project-based learning math initiative used iterative lesson study cycles that incorporated students' data. According to the teacher, engaging with two-way data tables of metrics representing them increased their motivation and interest in the mathematical and social concepts being taught.

Another middle school team working in a school serving primarily low income kids of color created an integrated project across disciplines with the theme of how bodies are being policed and criminalized. In a weeks-long project-based learning training, teachers gained skills to create meaningful, student-centered lessons. All 100 8th graders were highly engaged and completed "projects that mattered to them because they were about them." Student teams presented their work to peers, other teachers, and invited guests in a formal "defense of their learning". The multi-faceted projects explored both *what* is happening and *why*, and challenged students to create and offer solutions. For this team of teachers, having access to the training that sparked the creation of the curriculum and the ability to work with a coach resulted in what they described as profound experiences for 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 deeper engagement.

Bringing History to Life through More Inclusive Content

Making history more meaningful and relevant for students was at the heart of this LIGHT Awards project. Curriculum is updated in seven year cycles in this school district. Recognizing how outdated the history curriculum was, the team of elementary school teachers at two schools aimed to design lessons to ensure students could see themselves in the materials. Working with the UC Davis History Project and California Global Education Project, the team created a lesson database for teachers that focused on multiculturalism, inquiry, literacy, and civic action.

Using an ethnic studies and global lens, these teachers developed lessons that met all of the history standards. Teachers were able to add to their skill sets while providing engaging lessons for the students in 3rd-6th grade. Other teachers were included in the training and the excitement and momentum to design curriculum through these lenses has continued, even beyond this team of teachers. The project has created several resources for teachers to use, including new instructional strategies, content (completed lessons or historical pieces), suggestions for where to look for lessons already written, and protocols for providing feedback to each other.

Each lesson developed is launched from an age-appropriate picture book that profiles characters from history taking action in socially conscious ways. Teachers report increased engagement from students who are generating more questions about what they are seeing and reading. For example, one lesson on the California Missions sparked inquiry among the fourth graders about the treatment of indigenous people and ways those in power seek to dehumanize others. Lessons from that unit continue into learning about the gold rush and have deepened students' interest in learning history.

While the history curriculum was already scheduled for revisions, teachers involved were adamant that it would not have happened as productively or resulted in as high quality, student-centered lessons as they were able to create with the LIGHT Awards support.

"I love teaching these kinds of lessons. The kids actually care about them. This is why I want to infuse more of this!"

"Working and collaborating together and getting teacher mindsets changed about what to look for in a good lesson, that critical eye of who is included in the lesson was key. We took time looking and analyzing lessons to see what perspective it was from, including whose voices were missing. Even the tone of the language. The process of being able to examine the curriculum with a critical eye was so valuable not only for the product but for our continued learning."





The LIGHT Awards Process, Engagement & Enduring Impacts

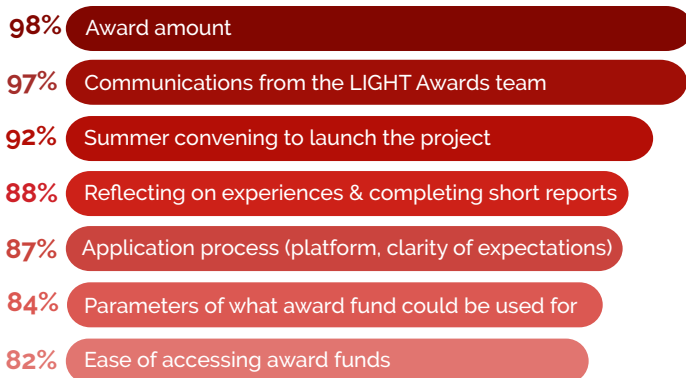
Effective administration of the LIGHT Awards contributed to its success and this form of capacity building leads to longer term impact.

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

The LIGHT Awards grants teams up to \$30,000 over two years to implement their 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 following statistics represent the percentage that reported the process and interactions with LIGHT Awards staff were clear/useful or very clear/very useful:



The funds typically are dispersed to a school, a district, or a nonprofit such as an education foundation or PTA 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 often being the smoothest), while others involve several procedural steps and potential problems. Several teachers reported challenges in accessing funds when district or school personnel turned over. Some fiscal agents take a percentage of grants or put the funds into the general accounts which creates obstacles for teams to access them. There were a number of examples in the survey data of districts restricting funds or adding hurdles for reimbursement that added to team leads' responsibilities. Clarifying agreements (e.g. MOU) with a district or school that includes reimbursement agreements for the team was suggested as a way to mitigate some challenges.

"The budget process was very tricky - the expectations of the LIGHT Awards vs. the processes demanded by our schools and districts. This aspect was exhausting and time consuming."

"More clarity needed with site leaders regarding the grant funding process / how funds may be expended / the team's authority to expend funds, etc."

Despite some logistical challenges, there was a high level of satisfaction as indicated in a Net Promoter Score of 9.4. A Net Promoter Score (NPS) is a marketing research tool that categorizes users (or participants in this case) as promoters, detractors, or in between. It asks the question on a scale of 1 to 10: "How likely is it that you would recommend the LIGHT Awards to a friend or colleague?" High results of 9 or 10 are desirable. There were several survey questions that were highly correlated to a high NPS score that help explain teachers' satisfaction with the experience.

They include:

- *experiencing meaningful professional growth*
- *meeting important learning needs*
- *feeling a sense of accomplishment*
- *working cohesively in a team*
- *developing professional practice*
- *impact on oneself*
- *pride in project work*

Each team had one member who was responsible for the application process and reporting. They rated those aspects highly as well. Also important to note were several examples of projects needing to be changed in some way, especially during the pandemic. Teachers spoke positively, and with gratitude, of the LIGHT Awards team's responsiveness to their requests to pivot their activities. The flexibility and agility as administrators of the grants helped projects be successful even with the unpredictable external factors that teachers were facing.

The grant was not without its challenges, though the ones identified by teachers related to any aspect of the grant process (e.g., accessing funds) were attributed to school or district practices, pandemic-related disruptions, or individual life circumstances. Ways to ease or address challenges are discussed in the Considerations section. Time surfaced in both survey and interview data as a major limiting factor in project experiences. The projects were typically above and beyond regular duties, unless a site leader had designated release time or enabled substitute teachers to cover classes. Several teams included a teacher on special assignment (TOSA), which teams highlighted as being especially helpful. The TOSAs had more flexibility to dedicate work time to grant and project coordination. Furthermore, in recent years the lack of availability of substitute teachers has grown, which has added to the necessity for many of the teachers to use more personal time to work on their LIGHT Awards project.

Teachers remarked throughout the research data about the overall graciousness they felt. From the summer convening experience to the expansiveness of how they could use award funds, throughout the survey data's open-ended responses and unprompted in the teacher interviews are comments about feeling

respected, honored, and appreciated by the LIGHT Awards experiences. In particular, the Summer convening to launch projects, set in such a lovely place, laid the groundwork for the grant experience. Several teachers remarked they had never been treated that well as a teacher; many had never stayed at such a nice hotel nor been centered in the work so intentionally. Several teachers remarked how important the gathering was for kicking off their projects given the opportunity for dedicated time with their teams, learning from expert speakers and to meet other educators starting their own efforts.

"Thank you! The convening was a wonderful kickoff event to make us teachers feel valued and appreciated!"

"The convening was inspirational and helped re-energize me at a low point in my teaching career."

"The most meaningful part was when I talked to fellow educators at the convening. It was inspiring and amazing to be with other like-minded educators who were about to embark on this journey as well. The LIGHT awards staff made me feel special and courageous and supported. We do not feel that at all in our district. The admin and district fought us every step of the way along this journey - the LIGHT awards people treated us with kindness and respect...THANK YOU!"

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

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.

Disseminating learnings for greater use

Sharing LIGHT Awards project learnings differed greatly among teams. Dissemination of project



outcomes or specific deliverables were not required in this grant opportunity. Rather, it was up to teams to decide if they wanted to engage with peers at their schools or districts or across their fields. Projects varied greatly in their scopes and involvement of others on campus. For example, an elementary school literacy-focused project brought in training that the team organized and worked directly with the consultant yet also invited others at their school to some of the workshops. Attendance at these focused literacy workshops was robust according to the team leader who noted the wider reach her project was able to accomplish. Her team was able to dive deeper into lesson planning in their meetings, and then share examples in the consultant-led workshops. The combination of team leadership and wider accessibility has led to increased interest and acceptance throughout the school.

Other teams were given staff meeting time to present what they were learning or to lead implementation of curriculum upon project completion. An elementary school team aiming to be prepared for district plans affecting language learners was able to do extensive planning and research on best practices, travel to observe different models in practice, and make suggestions for how their school might approach revising their program. In turn, in the second year, the district added to their efforts by paying for additional participants to attend conferences to ensure wider involvement and buy-in. The teacher leader was clear that the more expansive inclusion would not have happened without the proof points developed through their LIGHT Awards project.

For others, however, there was either little interest from site leadership or peers, or no real opportunities to spread their learning beyond their team. For those who did share, either through training other teachers or making curriculum available, the experiences were positive and it felt satisfying to be useful to their peers.

"Our team learned a diverse set of skills that were very beneficial once the pandemic hit. Given the scope of our project, we were able to share practices with teachers to help the transition into remote learning."

"Our experience transformed how we teach languages in our district. When new teachers come, we often have them observe us so that they can see a different way of teaching."

Creating enduring resources

The vast majority (91%) of teachers report creating a resource during their project that is still in use. Several projects included the purchasing of equipment or supplies. Some purchases outfitted designated learning labs or other physical spaces that continue to be used past the grant term. These include a Makers Space for project-based learning at a middle school that all teachers can access for their students, and similarly, an elementary school STEAM Exploration Lab for more hands-on science work. The Lab also hosts family science events at which students can share how things work and do mini-demonstrations. The popularity of "science night" surpasses other family engagement events.

Other projects having long term effects started relatively small with a few teachers at different grade levels getting trained in a particular curriculum that then grew to encompass the whole school's revision of how that subject is taught. This happened at a few elementary schools - one in how math was taught and another language arts for English Language Learners. At this school, the curricular changes and pedagogical strategies have spread to encompass the whole school:

"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."

Another project started with the aim to create a new Computer Science course that would be more appealing and accessible to a broader range of students than the traditional coding courses. A teacher leader and her team gleaned information from several workshops and conferences to create a new course that would bridge the gap between existing and emerging curriculum in this growing field. In the process of learning and connecting with other teachers and national organizations, not only was the course developed (and well subscribed over the past several years), but the teacher leader was subsequently hired by one of the outside organizations she learned from to train other teachers in 20 states to develop their own courses to meet national standards of the AP exam. She shared her appreciation for the opportunity afforded by the LIGHT Awards to follow her instinct and interests, and

noted how her own leadership and confidence grew from the experiences. This sense of pride extends to seeing how many students have benefitted from the course as well. As she shared,

"I loved being able to meet all these other teachers. Teaching can be a very isolating and lonely profession. Especially when starting something - to find another CS teacher is difficult. This gave me the opportunity to travel to different states and to talk with the people rolling things out, and I could ask questions 'Why are you making this decision?' 'What do you think kids are ready for at this stage and where does it come out in your curriculum?' To be part of the process and to give feedback, and to work with other teachers who were also diving in deep was so satisfying."

Building lasting relationships

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. As previously discussed, the collaborative experiences offered by the project - such as joint travel, participation in workshops, and focused meeting times - served as a connective tissue, or the 'special sauce', that facilitated individual teachers' professional growth and development through deepening relationships. Several teachers shared in interviews how both professional and personal relationships were strengthened and how much that has added to their lives. For example, a team of four middle school teachers whose project resulted in integrated programming across their courses shared how it not only elevated students' learning and improved meaning making but created a high functioning and


supportive professional learning community they had not previously experienced in their combined decades of teaching. As one teacher explains,

"I'm not a person who works well in isolation and neither are they, so it was nice to have someone to bounce ideas off of. We developed good friendships. We would visit each other's classroom and observe. 'Are you using a rubric, can I see it?' We shared a lot of ideas. We had each other's backs for the project and so much more."

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.

Grant Uses

- ▶ Conference attendance
- ▶ Travel expenses
- ▶ Classroom and school visitations
- ▶ Lesson studies (time and materials)
- ▶ Workshops and trainings: series or one-time
- ▶ Books and other instructional materials
- ▶ Coaching: ongoing or one-time
- ▶ Educational consulting with a nonprofit partner



"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."

"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."

Transforming Middle School Education Through Integrated STEAM Pathways

Recognizing the need for greater integration and connection within their individual elective offerings, four dedicated middle school teachers embarked on a remarkable journey to ignite 180 6th graders' curiosity in STEAM and provide them with more preparation for diverse electives in high school. The process of designing and actively pursuing their professional learning goals not only created integrated, highly engaging courses for their students, but also nurtured a community of educators to support each other and learn together. Those bonds continue to grow and spread beyond their courses.

Through their LIGHT Awards grant, the teachers worked with the Krause Center for Innovation for training and coaching in design thinking, Project-Based Learning, and other ways to integrate their courses more effectively. The teachers' collective expertise and shared vision brought the curriculum to life, infusing it with hands-on, inquiry-based activities that fostered critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The collaborative planning and collective focus to learn new content and pedagogy greatly enhanced the professional engagement of these four experienced educators. One of the teachers shared feeling reinvigorated, joyful, and renewed after more than two decades teaching.

The impact was profound for students and educators alike. The integrated curriculum provided a seamless transition between subjects, enabling students to make connections and grasp the relevance of their learning. Students became active participants in their own learning and gained practical skills across disciplines, including media production, technological development, and visual artistry. Students also had the opportunities to showcase their learning through creative outlets like school-hosted TED talks and Grammy's.

During the global pandemic, training went virtual and meeting together took new forms. Instruction changed as well for these equipment-heavy electives, challenging the teachers to be even more creative. However, their new bonds and sense of mutual empowerment kept them going.

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.

As the findings illustrate, collaboration was a major contributor to teacher professional growth. Effective teamwork is critical for the success of a project. When team members perceive that they are working cohesively and productively, they are more likely to feel a sense of accomplishment and to develop their professional practice as a community. Further, effective communication within the team, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and a well-planned implementation process are also important factors that contribute to successful teamwork. Survey data shows that effective teamwork is not just one factor, but a combination of different aspects of team dynamics. The correlations between those questions indicate that good teamwork is important for project success, and efforts to improve teamwork should focus on multiple dimensions of team dynamics, including communication, role clarity, accountability, and a sense of accomplishment. Continuing to invest in efforts that support and emphasize the significance of teamwork in project implementation such as sessions at the Summer convening on how to work together or other opportunities to emphasize its importance are recommended.

Better coordination with the fiscal entity would reduce challenges.

The most frequently expressed challenge, though only by a fraction of projects, was in accessing the project funds. Several project teams mentioned hassles - from minor to severe - in using funds that a school or district managed. Personnel changes, especially through the pandemic, left many team leaders scrambling to advocate for reimbursement or to use their funds. This was particularly present in larger districts, and especially challenging for teachers with no previous fiscal management experience. If a third party fiscal sponsor was involved, such as a PTA, this was less likely to be a problem. Having a clear Memo of Understanding (MOU) in place with each fiscal entity was recommended by some of the project

leads as a way to ameliorate the challenges of accessing funds, especially when there is personnel turnover.

Teacher pay and substitute teaching shortage was a limiting factor.

Many of the projects depended on collaboration time outside of normal school day availability which presented significant challenges when access to substitute teachers or other kinds of release time were not available. The substitute teaching shortage disproportionately affects lower resourced schools, yet all of the teachers interviewed mentioned it. Several teachers noted the shortage of substitute teachers or the complete lack of that option in their schools. Many used their own time to meet or curtailed their team's meeting time as a result (e.g., meeting on zoom instead of in person). For some, the inability to use LIGHT Awards funds to compensate for teacher time exacerbated the challenge. The LIGHT Awards policy is to offer a stipend to each teacher on the team, but not to pay for their time (which is particularly challenging to do given employment terms). Some teams included TOSAs (teachers on special assignment) who were able to dedicate time to their projects, which helped with coordination. Others had administrative support that provided coverage so teams could meet during regular school hours. As this teacher explains, this is an important aspect of respecting teachers:

"Given the nature of the award and the focus on valuing teachers, I think money should be allowed to be used to pay teachers for time worked. Sub days are fine, but we could have gotten more done by completing paid work in the summer. Too few grantors allow money to be spent in that way. You all have a unique approach in many ways. It feels like an honor to get the award and to be treated well throughout the whole experience. But you could show even more respect towards teachers as professional practitioners who are already WAY too busy by allowing us to actually pay ourselves for all the unpaid work we do."

Consider project priorities to increase impact.

By design, the funded projects of the LIGHT Awards are quite diverse. While they fall into some categories in terms of subject area, grade level or approaches



to professional learning, the opportunity presents itself for the LIGHT Awards team to consider where it most wants to seed innovation and impact. The LIGHT Awards team and advisors have a rigorous, well-defined process for selecting project teams to fund, including assessment rubrics and criteria for decisions. This research focused on the impact on teachers of the experience and did not investigate project outcomes per se other than from the educators' perspectives as reported in survey and interview data or as revealed from a review of project applications. An audit of completed projects could reveal important aspects of impact and provide insight toward areas to focus on. In addition, considering the assumptions, resources, and expected outcomes through the process of developing a Theory of Change may be a logical next step for this work.

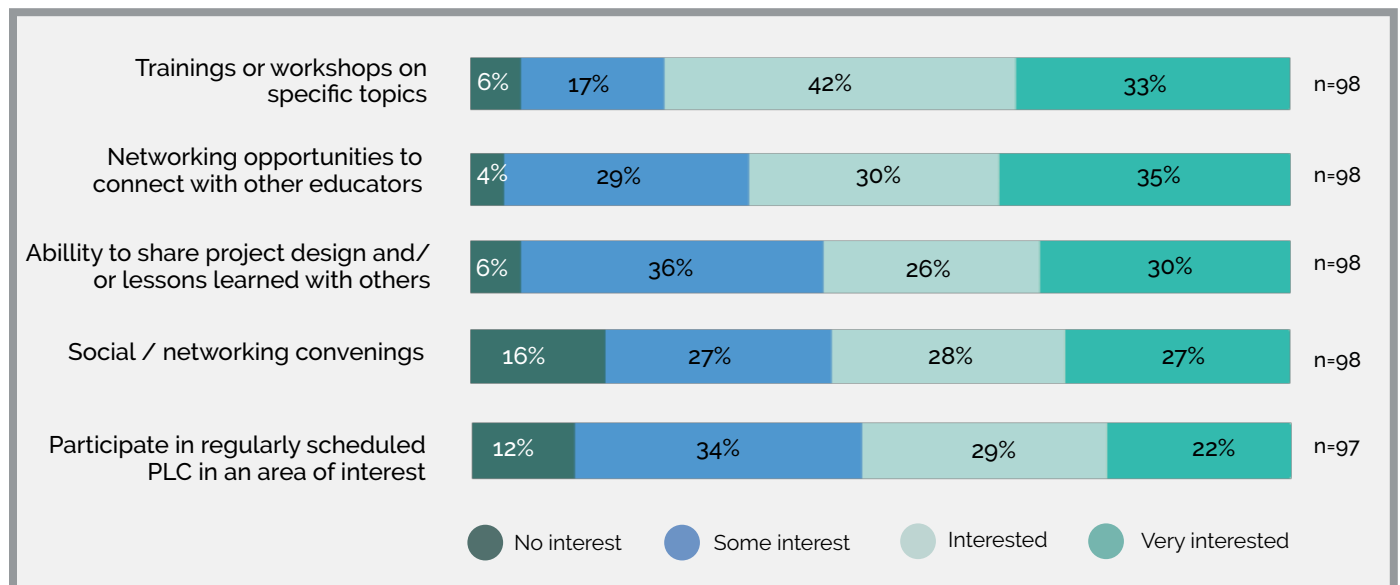
Explore expanding the LIGHT Awards continued engagement.

The research findings reveal the importance of professional learning designed by teachers and how impactful the LIGHT Awards opportunities have been. Considering how to continue to support ongoing engagement with teachers was a stated interest in the research design.

The majority of teachers are interested in continuing their engagement with the LIGHT Awards community. Many cited time as a major constraint while also expressing confidence in the quality of offerings experienced through the LIGHT Awards team thus far. Asked about possible ways to connect, 75% expressed interest in training or workshops on specific topics followed by 65% interested in networking opportunities. The chart below illustrates the different options.

Another approach for continued engagement that surfaced in teacher interviews is to consider ways for successful project teams to continue their work with another grant period. As this teacher who, along with her elementary school colleagues, continues to implement new curriculum and pedagogy strategies developed over the past five years since her LIGHT Awards project began states,

"Can you imagine if we came back 5 years later and then improved our practice even more?"



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. In fact, all of the teachers who were interviewed for the study reported that their projects would not have been possible without the resources and endorsement provided by the LIGHT Awards. That is partly due to lack of resources, school or district mandated initiatives being broader than their discipline or grade level specific interests/needs, or that the shift in professional learning in recent years has meant no access to conferences or travel or coaches or consultants in the way these funds allowed.

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 LIGHT Awards provided a unique opportunity for teachers to take ownership of their professional development and pursue projects that aligned with their personal and professional goals. The open endedness to the designs, that is being able to explore a topic of interest without a pre-designed

outcome, surfaced consistently in the data. Projects were designed intentionally to address gaps identified by experienced educators as essential building blocks for those higher needs.

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 themes 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.



Acknowledgements

Several people have been involved in the process of designing, implementing and reporting research findings over the five month inquiry. The author wishes to thank them for their thoughtfulness and dedication to pursuing the questions of impact with the utmost of care and adherence to research standards.

First, a heartfelt thanks to the teachers who took the time to participate in the survey, interviews, and focus groups. Their perspectives and insights have been instrumental in shaping the research findings, and their commitment to their work and appreciation for the grant experiences have been inspiring.

Special thanks to Karen Leshner, founder of Intrepid Philanthropy Foundation and creator of the LIGHT Awards for her deep commitment to teachers, authentic openness for learning, and engaging presence throughout the research inquiry. Gratitude as well to the advisors and board members, in particular Joanne Schneider and Roxana Rodriguez from Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, who administer the LIGHT Awards with alignment to their core values. Each advisor was interviewed at the start of the research and several participated in reviewing data collection protocol and early findings to provide input and feedback. The research design and reporting are better because of their questions and involvement.

I would like to acknowledge the diligent work of Paul Franz, who provided essential research support, including refining the database to ensure sample accuracy, survey administration support, and statistical analysis. His contribution was instrumental in ensuring data integrity. I also want to express my gratitude to Cassidy Villeneuve for her outstanding report production, including high-level editing and thought partnership. Her creativity, exceptional skills and attention to detail brought the research findings to life in this final report.

Finally, the words of American author and educator Parker Palmer capture the importance of teachers' passion and commitment to their work: *"Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher."* It has been an honor discovering how the professional learning opportunities provided by the LIGHT Awards, over the past nine years and 86 projects, have not only contributed to teachers' development, but have also nurtured their identities as educators, strengthened their connection to peers, and sparked what they bring to their classrooms and communities.

Logos courtesy of Intrepid Philanthropy Foundation, rights reserved. Unsplash image credits: Alexander Grey, Dan Cristian Pădureț, CDC, Hannah Busing; Noun Project icon credits: Andi Nur Abdillah, denis legusha. Adobe iStock image credits: blas, Gajus, highwaystarz, Jacob Lund, jittawit.21, lordn, Lou W./peopleimages.com, New Africa, Oksancia, Pixel-Shot, Rawpixel.com, Shutter B, Tierney, topvectors, WavebreakMediaMicro, Zarya Maxim