Summary of the Lessons for the Field from the Harvard Family Research Project’s
Integrated Learning Cluster Evaluation Review (September 2010)

In 2005, The Atlantic Philanthropies began a five-year national effort to keep disadvantaged youth ages 8 to 16 engaged in learning during out-of-school time (OST) hours. At the time, few approaches existed that integrated out-of-school learning supports into the school day. Atlantic’s strategy was to make a significant investment in OST programmes that were pioneering innovative ways to reach educationally disadvantaged students in hopes of spurring a rapid evolution of an integrated learning model.

To achieve its goals, Atlantic made large-scale, multi-year grants (ranging from $100,000 to more than $14 million) to national, state, and local organisations to work on one of three strands of investment. Overall, Atlantic invested over $115 million in 32 grantees. This “integrated learning cluster” approach included:

1) Direct service. Direct service grants assisted a select group of proven or promising organisations to increase the reach and quality of their youth-serving organisations and to carry out rigorous evaluations.

2) Infrastructure. Infrastructure grants supported organisations that provide a range of expertise to service providers to help them improve operations, strengthen programme measurement and results, and better coordinate information and resources.

3) Advocacy efforts. Advocacy grants supported national efforts to engage policymakers and the public on tax and budget issues relating to children and families. Investments also aimed at building the capacity of advocacy organisations pushing for more funding and better policies for integrated learning supports.

In 2010, Atlantic began a planned exit of its investments in the out-of-school time field.

As part of an ongoing evaluation of the Atlantic Philanthropies’ Children and Youth Programme in the US, Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) conducted an evaluation to document the key outcomes of the integrated learning cluster strategy.

Key Outcomes

The evaluation found that Atlantic helped build the OST field in the following ways:

- **Improved organisational capacity.** Atlantic enabled many grantees in their early stages of implementation to engage in organisational development. Forms of organisational development cited frequently by grantees were capacity for: data systems, communications, leadership, staffing and professional development, systems for sustainability and strategic planning.

- **Improved evaluation of integrated learning practices.** Recognising a federally-driven need to demonstrate results, Atlantic made significant investments in large-scale, rigorous evaluations, which have contributed to the evidence base of what constitutes quality programming and what outcomes quality programmes can produce.
Atlantic also supported grantees to obtain and use evaluation and other data for continuous improvement.

- **Improved advocacy and policy base for out-of-school learning supports.** Grantees engaged in policy- and advocacy-related activities including campaigns for funding and legislative change, media roundtables and symposia to help build public will for out-of-school learning as a core educational support.

- **Strengthened infrastructure for collaboration at a local and national level.** At a local level, Atlantic helped grantees create and maintain networks with other, similar organisations and with organisations beyond the OST nonprofit sector to support children’s learning and development. At the national level, Atlantic’s efforts helped grantees develop relationships with policymakers, practitioners across the country, institutions of higher education and others.

- **Improved professional development systems.** Atlantic investments provided substantial professional development capacity through expanding the reach of professional development models and through creating new professional development efforts with a national reach.

- **Moved toward a common mission and vision for OST.** Atlantic’s strategy supported a growing awareness of the importance of non-school supports to students’ learning, including out-of-school time programmes and summer learning.

- **Made key progress and long-term impacts in bringing integrated service models to scale.** Atlantic grantees said they found that Atlantic’s investments helpful to them in expanding their reach, fostering deep and consequential change in OST policy and practice, raising public awareness of the importance of OST in addressing educational disadvantage and shifting ownership of reform from advocates to OST practitioners and schools.

**Lessons Learned**

The evaluation noted the following lessons learned from Atlantic’s work to build the OST field.

*Lessons about Field-Building and Bringing Services to Scale*

- **Support for capacity-building is critical for field-building.** In order to achieve their goals and go to scale, organisations must have “their houses in order” before they can scale up their impact or make any significant contributions at the field level. One major benefit of Atlantic’s strategy is that while its funding helped to support specific outcomes, it also helped to support the infrastructure needed to reach these outcomes.

Among the examples of how grantees built their capacity:

- Higher Achievement made major changes to its board to make a better fit with its national expansion priorities. These changes included creating clear roles and responsibilities between the national board and the affiliate President’s
Councils, developing a board member agreement and defining the criteria for targeting and recruiting new board members.

- To help reduce structural racism, the Aspen Institute worked with Atlantic grantees and other leaders in the field by conducting Racial Equity Seminars. As a result of participation in an Aspen seminar, leaders at Schools Out Washington included action steps to develop cultural relevancy and racial equity in their most recent strategic plan.

- Atlantic funding helped grantees to attract and retain quality staff and volunteers. For example, the Dream Academy reported a decline in employee turnover. While their staff turnover was nearly 57% in 2006, by 2009 it had been reduced to 23%.

**Support for a strong advocacy base is also critical for field-building.** Atlantic’s support funded advocacy directly and enabled organisations to pursue advocacy activities. For example, recognising the potential to have a positive impact on summer learning loss, Atlantic made a multiyear commitment to help establish the National Summer Learning Association. The association worked to improve the availability and quality of summer learning programmes and support advocacy efforts to increase public investments in summer learning as a necessary educational support.

**Field-building requires a commitment to evaluation and knowledge development.** Part of building a field involves the need to assess whether the organisations involved are positioned to reach their goals, and how their activities translate into their desired outcomes. The outcomes of these evaluations help inform programme improvements and demonstrate to policymakers and other key stakeholders the effectiveness of OST programmes and integrated services for children and youth. Data collection for evaluation and programme improvement are key pieces to ensure that an organisation is on track to achieve success.

Atlantic invested in rigorous (i.e., experimental or quasi-experimental) evaluations of six OST programmes. Atlantic also made grants to help organisations collect and use data to inform continuous improvements. As a result, programmes could reflect on their practices and make adjustments as needed. For example, the Carrera programme implemented a management information system that provided them with a number of performance management tools to help increase its effectiveness and efficiency.

**Field-building requires a sustained and flexible financial commitment.** For organisations to be most effective, they must have long-term funding to allow them sufficient resources over time to make significant progress toward their goal and create systems that foster lasting impact. This funding must also allow for flexibility to make adjustments in where and how the money is spent, in response to the changing needs of the organisation and the larger field and policy climate.

Grantees felt that the flexibility and multi-year funding allowed for in Atlantic’s funding provided benefits to their work.
However, field-building requires a sustained financial commitment and some grantees felt that Atlantic fell short of enabling them to complete their work in developing a common agenda for out-of-school time.

Conclusion

The evaluation concluded that Atlantic is leaving the out-of-school time field in a strong position to take its place at the education reform table. Atlantic has helped strengthen the field through its focus on organisational capacity, evaluation, advocacy and professional development. It has also put in place some important structures that will help organisations go to scale with their work.

The work that remains is to ensure that these supports are integrated with each other and with schools to create a comprehensive and seamless learning experience that engages even the most disengaged youth.