Request for Letters of Interest: Covid-19 Response Initiative in the United States

Schools should unlock the creativity and power of every young person and equip each one to shape more just and equitable communities. But, the impact of Covid-19 on students, teachers, schools, and education systems is unprecedented. After a year of school closures and remote learning, we are only beginning to understand the long-term impact of the disruption. Covid-19 will affect education systems for decades, if not generations. In response, Oak Foundation is seeking an intermediary partner to co-develop, launch, and lead a programme of up to USD 6 million to re-grant to not-for-profit education organisations in the United States. The intermediary partner will invest in efforts to recover, rebuild, and reimagine learning environments that catalyse improvements to support students with learning differences who experience further marginalisation due to systemic racism and/or poverty.

About Oak Foundation and the Learning Differences Programme

Oak Foundation supports civil society as a pillar of democracy and justice and nurtures innovation and visionary leadership within it. We value diversity both within Oak and among our partners; we seek to be inclusive, flexible, and engage with different points of view. We pursue rights-based approaches, gender equality, and partnership with organisations we fund. We believe that the best grant-making reflects both careful due diligence and the willingness to take risks. We make grants to organisations in approximately 40 countries worldwide across the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Oak has approximately 90 staff with most of them located in Geneva, London, and Chapel Hill (NC).

Oak Foundation’s Learning Differences Programme (LDP) believes that every student should benefit from engaging and rigorous educational opportunities regardless of personal and social identifiers that privilege some students and marginalise others. In our work, we are particularly focused on efforts that support students with learning differences who experience additional adversity due to systemic racism and/or poverty. Our grantee partners rethink ways learning happens for students who are furthest from opportunity and better prepare adults to engage and support all students. We support research, the translation of research to educator practice, and systems change efforts that promote more equitable learning outcomes for students with learning differences.

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1 The LDP defines learning differences to include specific learning disabilities (including dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia) as well as other related neurological processing issues that can impact learning such as attention deficits, sensory processing disorders, and executive function challenges. Oak includes both those who have been formally identified for special education and related services as well as those who do not but who experience challenges between the ways they learn best and the ways classrooms and instruction have typically been designed. An estimated 1 in 5 people experience these types of learning differences in the U.S.
Context

The impact of Covid-19 on students, teachers, schools, and education systems is unprecedented. After a year of school closures and remote learning, we are only beginning to understand the long-term impact of the disruption. Covid-19 will affect education systems for decades, if not generations.

Even as researchers, practitioners, and policymakers work to understand the impact of Covid-19 on our education systems, there is inadequate information available on how the pandemic is specifically affecting students with learning differences. The data that is available on the likely effects of Covid-19 and related school closures for students with learning differences is limited and troubling. While organisations that were already focused on students with learning differences before the pandemic continue to advocate, support, and create meaningful resources and research, there is much more that can be done to meet the needs of the most vulnerable learners. At the same time, philanthropic, policy, and practice leaders agree that the once-in-a-lifetime disruption creates a once-in-a-lifetime imperative to seize the opportunity to improve upon the status quo. As with any disruption, Covid-19 also creates opportunities for students with learning differences, schools, and systems. The LDP’s commitment to students who are furthest from opportunity creates an imperative to respond to the pandemic across all its work – now and into the future.

The LDP recognises that philanthropy has an important role to play to help understand, elevate, and address the inequities that have been exacerbated by this monumental disruption to education. In response to the pandemic, the LDP seeks to deepen its support for students with learning differences who are furthest from opportunity by supporting efforts to recover, rebuild, and reimagine learning environments post pandemic. A deep focus on the equity chasm exacerbated by the pandemic will be incorporated across the LDP’s grant-making moving forward.

Overview

In addition to our annual grant-making, the LDP is launching a targeted initiative to re-grant to not-for-profit education organisations in the United States that are implementing meaningful solutions to address the effects of the pandemic on the most vulnerable learners and ensure longer-term systemic change. Oak has allocated up to USD 6 million for this initiative, and is seeking an intermediary partner to co-develop, launch, and lead this effort. The purpose of this initiative is to catalyse solutions to create supportive learning environments for students with learning differences who experience additional adversity due to poverty and/or racism in the United States, as we recover from the effects of Covid-19 now and into the future.

Urgent need for immediate attention to the challenges facing students and opportunities for long-term change

With this initiative, the LDP seeks to balance the urgent need for immediate attention to the challenges facing students with learning differences as they return to in-person learning with the need and opportunity for longer-term systemic change. Through this initiative, the LDP seeks to address the opportunity for transformation of outdated and unsupportive educational systems and structures while supporting the immediate needs of students and educators. This includes pragmatic solutions that support students and educators as well as broader transformation efforts focused on meeting the needs of students with learning differences beyond the immediate crisis. The scope of the initiative will focus on the “rebuild and reimagine” phases described in the chart below. The LDP recognises that change may not be linear, and efforts launched in the near-term have the potential to meaningfully contribute to longer-term efforts transform and stabilise education systems.
Through this initiative, the LDP seeks to balance the needs for immediate relief, recovery, and transformation.

Role of intermediary partner

The LDP is seeking an intermediary partner who will bring its own unique perspective, expertise, and vision to co-design and implement the initiative, aligned to the LDP’s vision and stated purpose. The intermediary’s role includes:

- bringing an innovative vision and approach to this effort that is aligned to the LDP’s vision and strategy;
- establishing an inclusive and equitable process for sub-grantee selection;
- attracting and selecting diverse projects and sub-grantees to accomplish the initiative’s goals;
- distributing sub-grants;
- providing oversight and support to sub-grantees;
- facilitating learning among sub-grantees; and
- monitoring and sharing lessons related to progress and impact.
Needs and opportunities the initiative will address

The LDP conducted an analysis in early 2021 that uncovered several critical challenges and opportunities the pandemic has exacerbated for students with learning differences. The list below includes those the LDP identified as high priority. The LDP is also open to prospective intermediary partners proposing to address additional challenges or opportunities facing students with learning differences.

Potential challenges and opportunities

Between school closures and lack of in-person contact, many students with learning differences have not been identified for additional support and they may have missed valuable services.

Thousands of students have not been able to participate in remote learning and have missed nearly a year of instruction. Students with disabilities who are furthest from opportunity have been disproportionately absent.

The pandemic has created greater infrastructure for personalised, blended and hybrid learning environments. Educators, students and parents have become more adept at using technology to support learning.

During the pandemic, a variety of alternative models for services have been invented out of necessity (such as virtual IEP meetings).

Social and emotional supports are more critical than ever now.

Potential questions

→ How will we identify and help these students receive critical services and support? What should this support look like? What improvements can be made to the way support was delivered before and during the pandemic?

→ How will we find those students, support and reengage them to resume their learning and receive vital support?

→ How are we taking advantage of these advances to permanently transform learning environments to better serve students with learning differences?

→ How will we capture, test and share those promising practices that are working for students with learning differences?

→ How will we ensure that social and emotional learning efforts support students with learning differences?

Initiative timing

Through this Covid-19 response initiative, the LDP is seeking to identify an intermediary partner in mid-2021 and make up to a four-year grant to launch the initiative in late summer/early fall 2021. The intermediary should be prepared to begin work on the initiative upon receipt of a grant in early fall 2021.
Selection criteria and LOI Process

The LDP is seeking a US-based intermediary partner(s) to co-create and lead an effort to recover, rebuild, and reimagine learning environments for students with learning differences in response to Covid-19. Collaborations between not-for-profit organisations are welcome.

Prospective intermediary organisation(s) for the initiative will meet the following criteria.

1. **Commitment and alignment to support students with learning differences** who are furthest from opportunity during and after the Covid-19 pandemic
   - Align with the vision and desired impact for the initiative, and with the LDP's vision and strategy
   - Bring a bold, unique vision, and strategy for the initiative
   - Maintain commitment to focus on students with learning differences who are furthest from opportunity

2. **Commitment and plan to advance an equity agenda**
   - Commitment to and track record of prioritising racial justice, diversity, equity, and inclusivity
   - Plan to elevate diverse community voices in initiative design and implementation
   - Ability to expand reach of the LDP by reaching a broad network of potential sub-grantees

3. **Financial and operational systems and structures to manage initiative**
   - Not-for-profit status in the United States (collaboratives of not-for-profit organisations are welcome to apply and should identify a lead organisation to receive the grant)
   - Capacity to receive grants and redistribute funds effectively and efficiently at the scale of this initiative
   - Strong financial management and governance

4. **Organisational capacity to support initiative**
   - Vision, strategy, and capacity to design and lead the initiative
   - Expertise, capacity, and prior experience selecting, monitoring, and supporting grantee partners
   - Capacity to communicate effectively with broad range of stakeholders
   - Previous experience leading relevant education initiatives, including content expertise for students with learning differences
   - Experience developing measurement, evaluation, and learning plans to assess impact and share learning

Organisations or collaborations that are interested in being considered as an intermediary partner are invited to submit a letter of interest that responds to the following questions:

1. What is your vision and proposed approach for how best to reach students with learning differences during this critical time?
2. How will the initiative advance equity for students with learning differences who are furthest from opportunity?
3. What is the desired short and longer-term impact for the initiative?
4. Will the initiative prioritise new innovations or expand promising practices? Will the initiative prioritise early-stage or later-stage implementers? What is the balance?
5. Describe the organisational and financial capacity of your organisation(s) to lead this initiative, with particular attention to capacity to manage and redistribute funds.

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2 The LDP has adapted this definition of equity from Open Source Leadership: Equity is a proactive strategic mindset and method that confronts structural differences in power, opportunities, burdens, and needs to design targeted, systemic solutions that shift power and deliver results that matter and last.
6. What expertise will your organisation(s) bring to this initiative to support sub-grantees and promote learning within and beyond the initiative?
7. How will the initiative reach broad and diverse groups of potential organisations, partners and solutions to support students with learning differences, and ensure equitable selection of grantee partners?
8. If applying as a collaboration, please describe the division of roles between each organisation.

Supplemental materials:

- Provide organisational profile(s) including bio(s) for individuals who will hold primary responsibility for the project.
- Provide a high-level budget that details the portion of the budget to be re-granted and the percent of proposed direct and indirect costs for the initiative. Finalists will be asked to provide more detailed budgets at a later stage of the selection process.
- Provide the names of two references for related/relevant prior work.

Please share your intent to submit a response by 5 April 2021 by submitting an email to reimagine@oakfnd.org.

Letters of Interest should be submitted by 16 April 2021 to reimagine@oakfnd.org and should not exceed six pages.

Budget, bios, and other supplementary materials can exceed the six-page limit. We will schedule phone interviews with finalists in late-April before selecting a partner to move forward with a formal grant application to Oak Foundation. Please send questions to reimagine@oakfnd.org.