

CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITIES

14. Enhance the resourcing and impact of field catalysts in order to advance equitable systems change within education

“Field catalysts” like SERN play a valuable role in advancing equitable systems change and enhancing the impact of other actors in a field to achieve large-scale social change; however, they are not yet widely understood as an essential ecosystem actor. They rely on philanthropic funding and are [often under-resourced](#). This [article](#) shares reflections on SERN’s experiences and assets as a field catalyst as it evolved into this role.

Field catalysts help cultivate field-level learning, focus attention on key issues, broker new relationships across silos, develop shared strategies and agendas, and bring new resources to a field. They also enable others in the field to focus on what they do best (e.g., research, providing technical assistance, delivering programming), while simultaneously advancing those actors’ work on the field’s focal issue beyond what they could have done alone. However, it can be challenging to build understanding of the vital and unique role field catalysts play given traditional impact metrics and conceptualizations of how large-scale change happens. Everyone has a role to play in building support for and enhancing the impact of these essential field-building entities.¹ **The student experience field needs entities that perform field catalyst functions, as does the field of education broadly.**

Enhance the profile and impact of field catalysts.

Consider how field catalysts fit into your theory of how impact will happen and where field catalyst functions are needed to enable that vision. With other field actors, engage in a [systems-level analysis](#) of the root causes and pathways to your desired impact and assess where [field catalyst functions](#) are needed to enable and accelerate connections and progress among a broader ecosystem of individuals and organizations, and determine which entities currently are performing or could perform some of these functions.

Identify where existing field catalysts might benefit from your engagement and support to expand their reach and impact. Field catalysts can benefit from both financial and non-financial (e.g., brokered introductions, sharing expertise) [resources](#).

Help entities serving in field catalyst roles better understand and enhance their impact by sharing back with them how they have affected your work, as well as what needs you see in the field looking forward.

Advocate for greater financial resources for field catalysts in education.

Educate others about the role and impact of field catalysts, and what capabilities are important to look for and support in field catalysts. Consider how long-standing mental models and frameworks for understanding impact and how change happens in fields might need to shift to accommodate field catalysts.

Advocate for funding for these types of field catalyst functions and entities, including helping funders understand how these entities improve your work and contribute to advancing collective impact in the field at scale.

¹ It is important to note that entities that have primarily engaged in other types of activities can evolve to take on field catalyst functions and that multiple field catalysts can exist and play complementary roles within a field.