



Adapting with Intention: A Funder's Decisionmaking Framework for Policy and Funding Shifts



The U.S. is undergoing one of the most significant transformations in education policy in decades.

Shifting federal, state, and local policies—and evolving funding priorities—are creating new challenges for K12 and higher education systems, intensifying the need for philanthropic action and support.



The call for greater philanthropic leadership is emerging alongside increasingly complex decisions shaped by policy, equity and capacity constraints





Education First developed a **Decisionmaking Framework** to guide funders in evaluating emerging issues and grantee requests during moments of major political, policy and funding shifts.

This tool is intended to support foundation leaders and program officers assess emerging opportunities for new or continued investment and grantee requests during politically charged policy or funding shifts.

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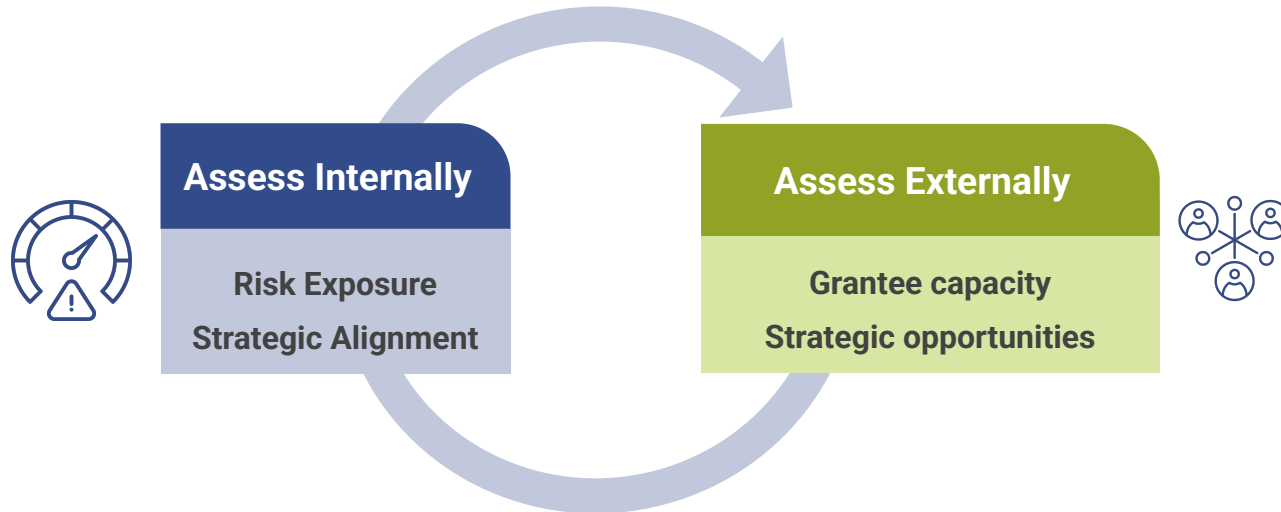
[Overview of Decisionmaking Framework](#)

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To act strategically, funders navigating this landscape must consider not just what to support—but how, when and why—across several critical dimensions

Decisionmaking Framework for Navigating Policy and Funding Shifts



It is critical for funders to assess risk exposure and mission alignment in order to make strategic, defensible funding decisions in a volatile policy environment

Assess Internally

Risk Exposure
Strategic Alignment



Key Considerations

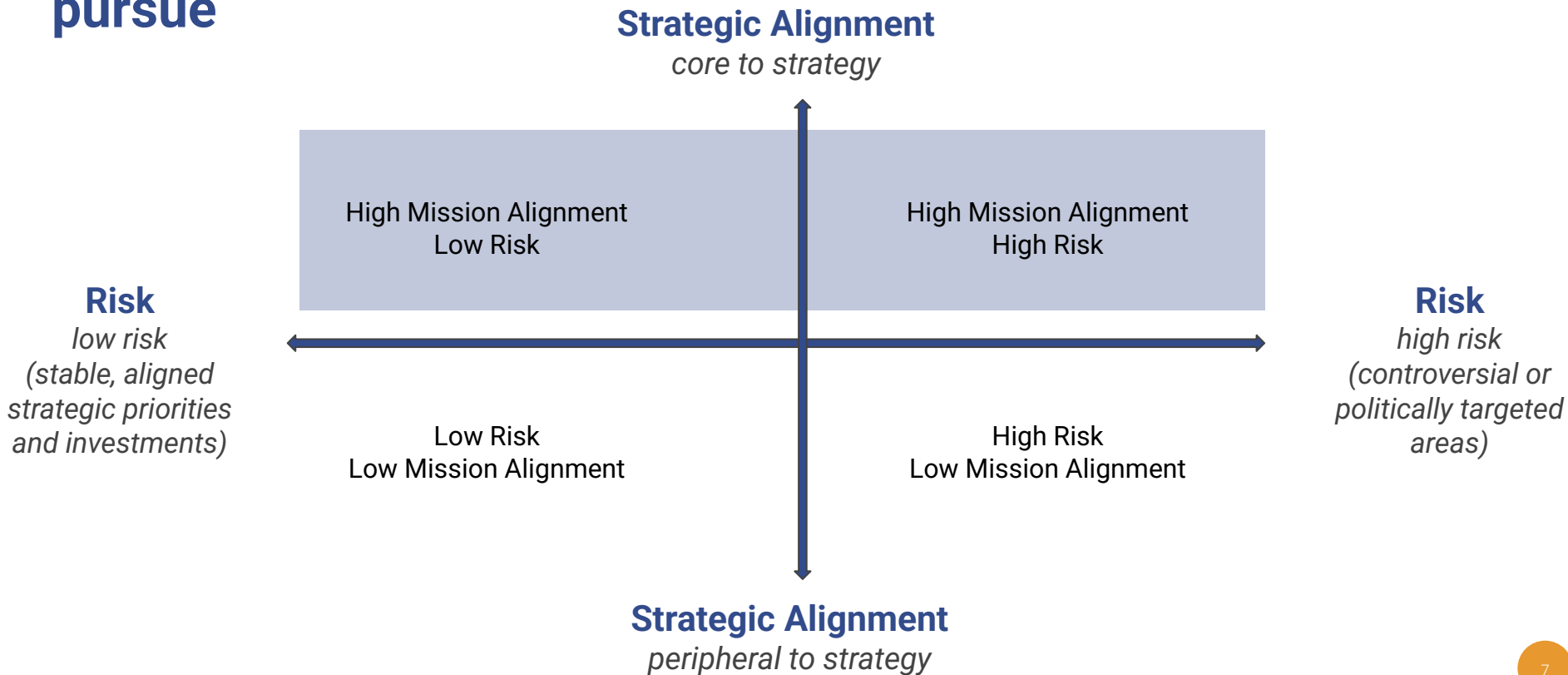
What are the mission, reputational, political, legal and financial risks of pursuing this opportunity?

Low risk (stable, aligned strategic priorities and investments) \longleftrightarrow High risk (controversial or politically targeted areas)

How central is the opportunity or grantee work to the our stated strategy?

Peripheral to strategy \longleftrightarrow Core to strategy

Understanding potential risks and anchoring in your core mission can provide direction for which opportunities to pursue

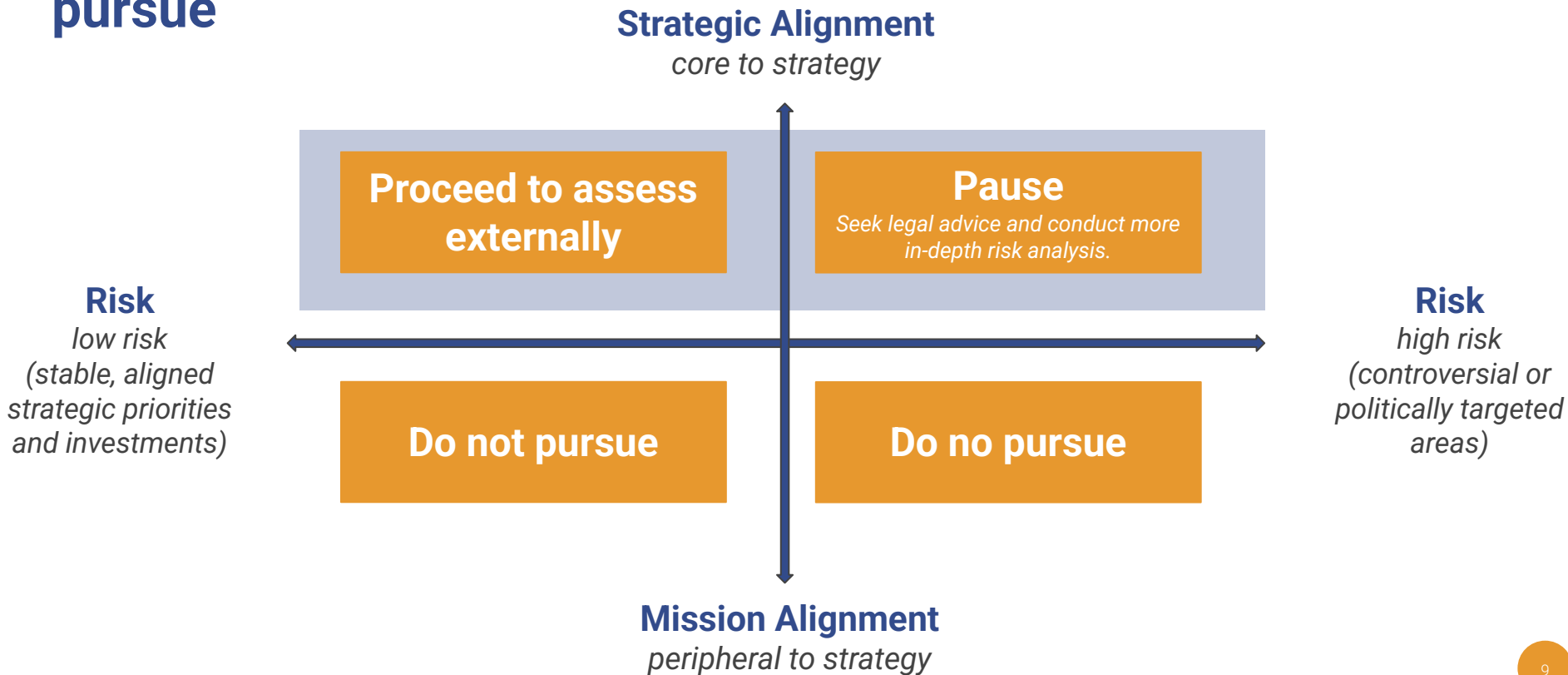


When assessing risk and mission alignment, remember...



- **Risk doesn't have to be a stop sign—let it be a strategic signal.** Taking action in high-risk environments isn't about avoiding exposure—it's about *understanding* and *managing* that exposure in service of your mission.
- **Values-driven risk is often the most defensible.** It's important to evaluate the tradeoffs between different types of risk. When an issue is both high-risk and high-alignment with strategy and values (e.g., racial equity, quality education access), abandoning your mission, strategy and and values carries significant and unpredictable costs.
- **Inaction is action.** Consider moments where inaction could be even more damaging to credibility, trust and long-term impact.
- **Not all risks are equal—or equally yours.** Understand whose risk you're managing: reputational risk to the foundation, operational risk to grantees or systemic risk to the communities you aim to serve. Let those distinctions guide how you assess, absorb or share risk across partners.

Understanding potential risks and anchoring in your core strategy can provide direction for which opportunities to pursue



Once you've evaluated a strategic opportunity or grantee request internally and determined that:

- a) the risk levels are manageable, and
- b) the alignment with your strategy is high



Proceed to assess externally

Evaluate grantee capacity and strategic opportunities

In some cases, opportunities and grantee requests may require a more in-depth risk analysis



Your organization may need to explore different types of risk:

- Risk of legal action and its associated consequences as a result of noncompliance with federal orders.
- Risk to an organization's mission, values, purpose, etc. by taking actions (or inactions) counter to that mission, such as in response to federal orders.

Pause

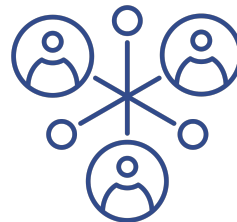
Seek legal advice and conduct more in-depth risk analysis.

For a more in depth analysis of current federal policy risks and strategies to respond, check out [*Facts in the Flood: Education First's analysis of federal education policy under the Trump Administration*](#)

Understanding current and future grantee capacity and identifying meaningful leverage opportunities can reveal where support will matter most

Assess Externally

Grantee capacity
Strategic opportunities



How strong, flexible and ready are grantees to respond to policy and public funding shifts?

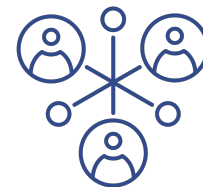
Under-resourced, fragile \longleftrightarrow *Well-positioned, adaptive*

Where can philanthropic dollars unlock or align with public dollars, momentum or systems change?

Limited opportunity for influence \longleftrightarrow *High leverage point for change or alignment*

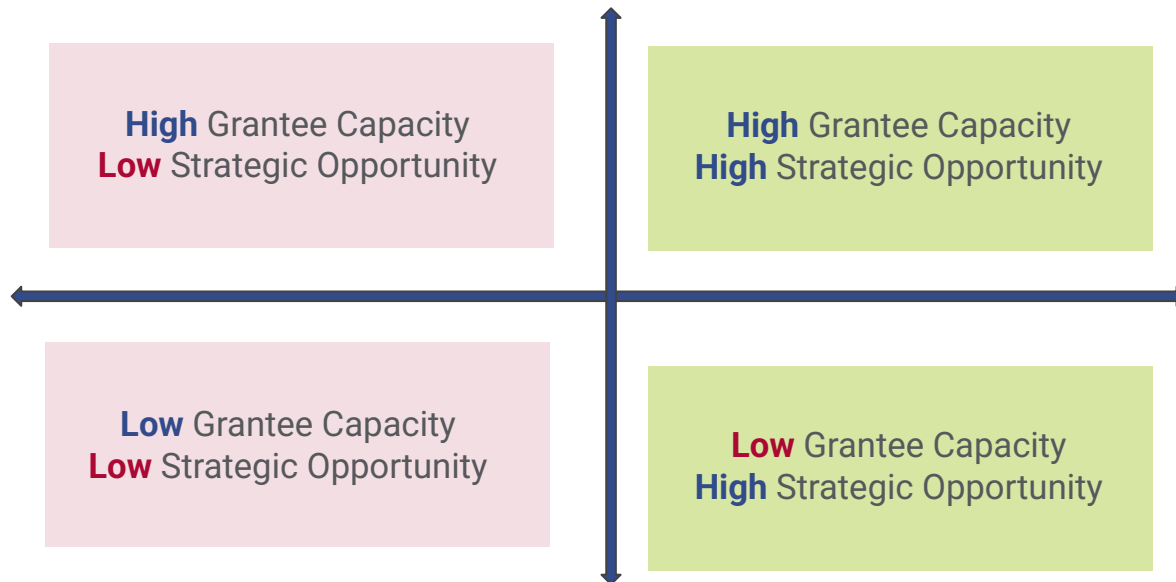
Key Considerations

Decisions that leverage high grantee capacity and strategic opportunities have the highest potential for impact



Grantee Capacity
well-positioned, adaptive

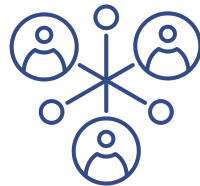
Strategic Opportunity
limited opportunity for influence



Strategic Opportunity
high leverage point for change

Grantee Capacity
under-resourced, fragile

Philanthropies should fund collaboratively in areas where grantee capacity and strategic opportunities align



High grantee capacity and high strategic opportunity:

Funders should consider opportunities in this space that support alignment of multiple partners and/or grantees and consider pooling resources toward common (and bold) work. Efforts that help avoid duplication and leverages existing capacity are key. Common and shared agendas can also help reduce risk.

Collaborative and field-wide efforts often require more time and greater trust to align across multiple funders and partners.

High Grantee Capacity
High Strategic Opportunity

Summary of Actions:

- Pool funds and invest in bold ideas
- Support rapid response
- Field-wide strategy or advocacy, including convenings, coalitions or public campaigns

We recommend funders leverage their convening and capacity-building power to prepare grantees to better respond to the strategic opportunities



Low grantee capacity and high strategic opportunity:

Funders should consider opportunities that increase capacity of grantees to respond to the opportunity. This might include providing more general operating support or other methods to build collective or individual capacity. This area is a great space for technical assistance (e.g., legal, communications, strategy). In addition, networks of grantees might help provide cover and stretch tight resources further, such as networks of districts and/or states.

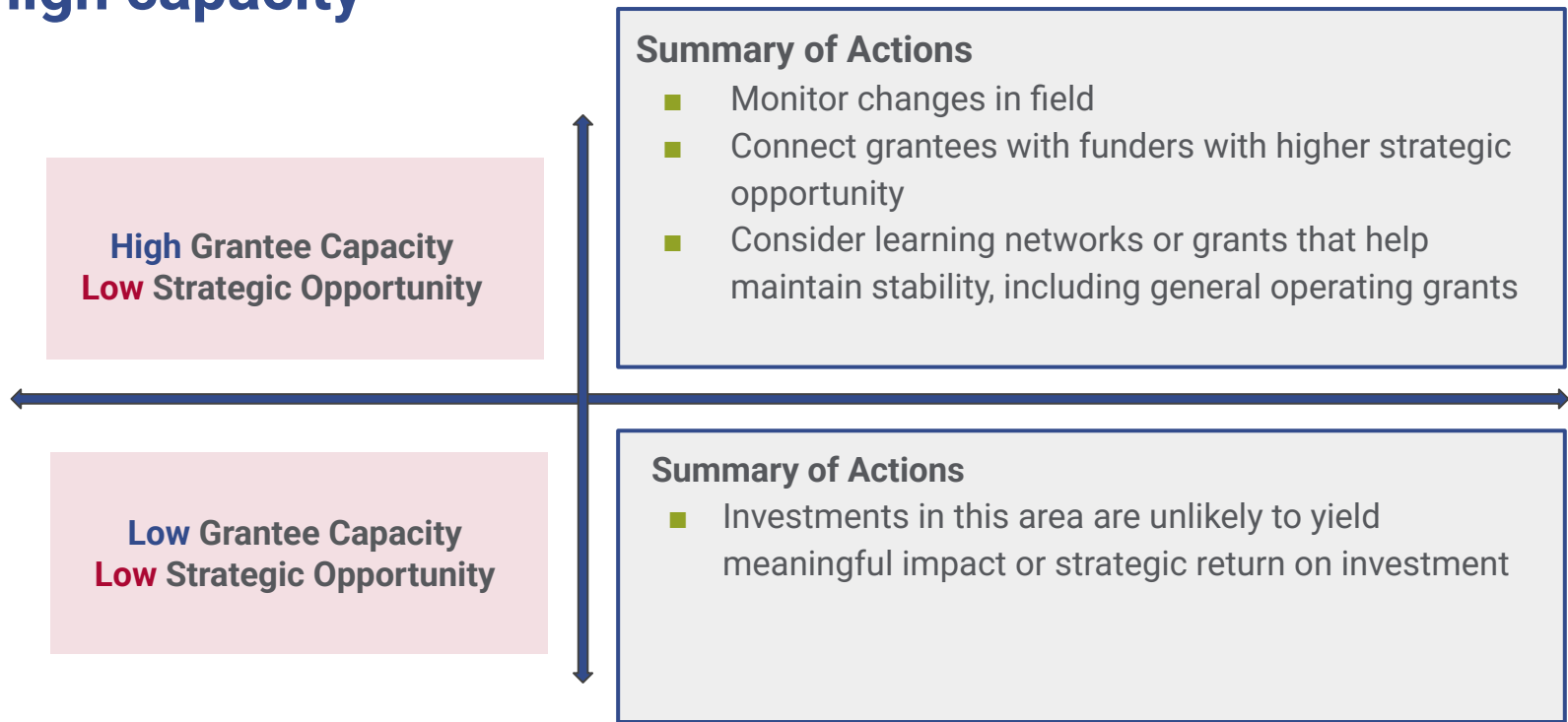
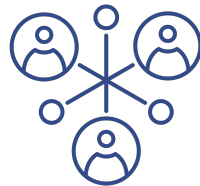
Note that networks require capacity to engage and funders should be cognizant of those requirements as they design supports.

Summary of Actions

- Invest in capacity building (collective or individual)
- Provide technical assistance resources
- Support grantee partnerships to improve capacity and learning

Low Grantee Capacity
High Strategic Opportunity

While awaiting more strategic opportunities, funders may consider light-touch support in areas where grantees have high capacity



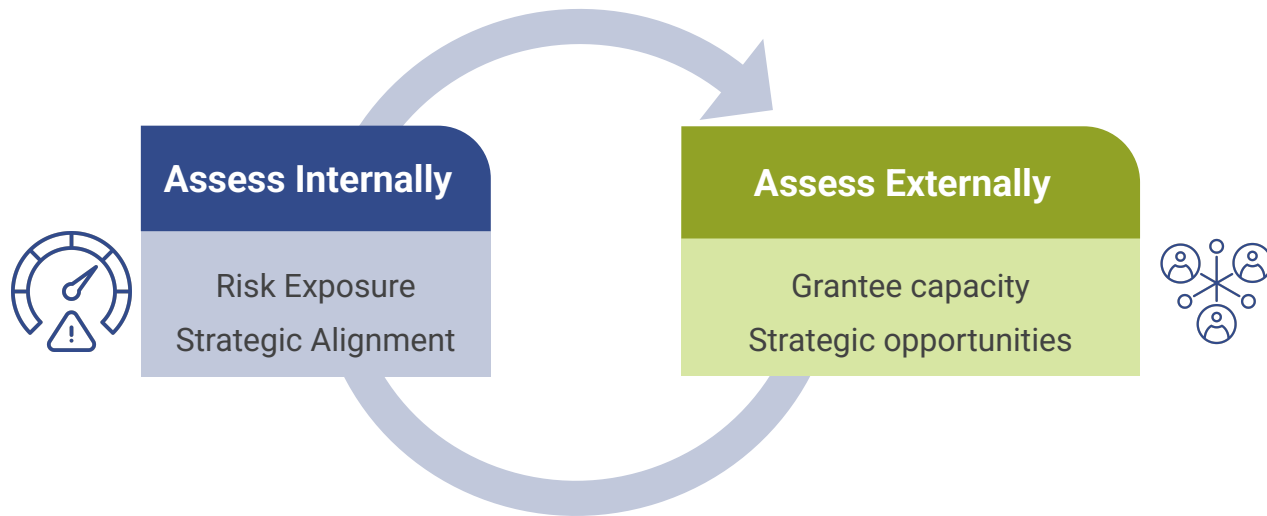
When assessing grantee capacity and strategic opportunity, remember...



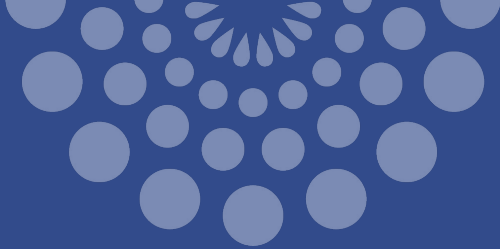
- **Be aware of capacity.** The best strategies fail if funders and grantees can't execute them. Understanding capacity allows funders to match support to readiness—offering stabilization when needed and acceleration when possible.
- **Leverage your autonomy, but don't try and play a government's role.** Philanthropy often has more autonomy than the public sector. In moments of governmental change, consider what you can do but others can't, and where you might be able to serve as a temporary bridge to sustainable funding for high-priority organizations or programs.
- **Consider in the ecosystem, not just the moment.** Strategic opportunities are often transformative if the field is ready to learn from and sustain them. Determine when time-bound opportunities make sense, and when to strengthen grantee networks, shared infrastructure and long-term capabilities so that bold long term ideas are scaled and sustained.
- **Build coalitions.** Systems change is rarely solo work. Knowing whether others are aligned can help funders choose between going it alone, building quiet coordination or investing in collective action.

Funders are positioned to respond to this moment of political, policy and funding uncertainty with clarity, courage and purpose

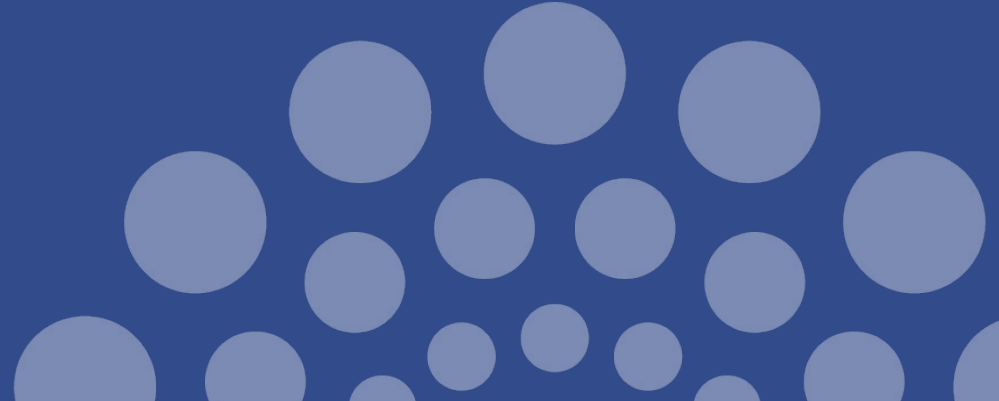
Funders can meet the moment by taking the time to strategically assess risk and mission alignment, identify the partners you need to co-design with and who you need buy-in from, and prioritize high leverage opportunities with intention, urgency and impact in mind.



**Decisionmaking Framework for
Navigating Policy and
Funding Shifts**



Applying the Decisionmaking Framework to Emerging Issues Facing Funders



Let's explore and apply the decisionmaking framework to three relevant scenarios

Scenario #1:

Request for bridge funding and strategic communications support to navigate cuts to Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) Grant Program

Scenario #2:

Request for pooled funding to support state education agencies to plan and implement changes to federal funding flexibilities

Scenario #3:

Request to support a group of resource constrained diversity, equity and inclusion focused nonprofit organizations respond to federal policy and funding requirements

Scenario #1: Should we provide bridge funding and strategic communications support to grantees navigating cuts to Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) Grant Program?

The federal government has proposed significant reductions to the *Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) Grant Program*, which currently funds teacher residency models and university-district partnerships to prepare effective educators for high-need schools. The cuts are part of a broader shift in federal priorities, with funds re-allocated toward workforce and apprenticeship initiatives.

Several state education agencies and local districts have paused or cancelled upcoming RFPs tied to TQP grants, leaving a cohort of high-performing grantees—many of whom have demonstrated strong outcomes for teacher retention and student achievement—at risk of scaling back or shutting down. Higher education institutions with embedded residency partnerships are laying off staff, cancelling upcoming cohorts and questioning the viability of continuing their programs without external funding. Advocacy and policy organizations are sounding the alarm but are fragmented in their response and struggling to coordinate across federal, state and local stakeholders. Grantees in rural and underserved communities—where alternative certification pipelines are limited—face existential risk as they lack the cushion or political capital to replace lost funds quickly.

Several funders are unsure whether to step in. You've been approached by two long-time grantees requesting bridge funding and strategic communications support to weather the policy change and advocate for state- or locally-funded alternatives.



Assess Internally

Strategic Alignment
core to strategy

**Proceed to
assess externally**

Pause

*Seek legal advice and conduct
more in-depth risk analysis.*

- Strategic for funders with a long-standing focus on educator pipelines.
- Responsible bridge investment with clear ROI on retention.
- Investments in evidence-based models.

- Perceived as political if supporting progressive prep models under attack.
- Risk of propping up programs that may not survive long-term.
- May invite scrutiny in conservative states.

Risk
low risk

Risk
high risk

Do not pursue

Do not pursue

Strategic Alignment
peripheral to strategy



Assess Externally

Grantee Capacity
high

- Support evaluation studies or case-making to inform future reauthorization of TQP.
- Fund national storytelling or alumni networks to preserve visibility.
- Provide bridge funds tied to sustainability planning.

- Provide multi-year grants to top-performing residencies to sustain partnerships.
- Fund advocacy campaigns to secure local or state match funding.

Strategic Opportunity
low

Strategic Opportunity
high

Do not pursue

- Fund technical assistance for rural or under-resourced programs.
- Offer shared services (e.g. HR, recruitment, licensure compliance).

Grantee Capacity
low

Scenario #2: Should we pool funding to support state education agencies to plan and implement changes to federal funding flexibilities?

A coalition of philanthropic organizations has been approached to consider a pooled fund supporting state education agencies (SEAs) as they adapt to sweeping changes in federal funding flexibilities. The shifts to funding flexibility come with minimal technical assistance and tight windows of opportunity for planning and stakeholder engagement.

Several SEAs see the new flexibilities as an opportunity to rethink outdated compliance-driven spending strategies and redirect funds toward more coherent and student-centered initiatives. But most are under-resourced and under-staffed, and lack the capacity to design, pilot and evaluate new approaches without outside help. State teams are especially struggling with cross-office coordination, equity guardrails and engagement of district and community voices in the reallocation process.

A few leading states have moved quickly to launch internal task forces or convenings with key stakeholders, but without pooled philanthropic support, their ability to sustain these efforts, or share tools and learning with peers, is limited. In contrast, other states are quietly defaulting to status quo practices or holding back discretionary funds entirely, fearful of political backlash or audit risk.

A group of national intermediaries and policy experts has developed a plan for a time-limited fund to support SEA planning and capacity building in 6–8 states, including technical assistance, peer learning and documentation of promising practices. You've been asked to weigh in on the case for investment and whether your organization should join the pooled fund, either as a core contributor or a learning partner.



Assess Internally

Strategic Alignment
core to strategy

**Proceed to
assess externally**

- May align with systemic policy reform goals, with low political exposure.
- Aligns with funders focused on system-level change and state capacity.
- Seen as timely technical investment.

Pause

Seek legal advice and conduct more in-depth risk analysis.

- Some risk in backing states pushing controversial finance or assessment reforms.
- May be politically charged in swing states, especially by legislative resistance.
- Risk of unclear or unmeasurable outcomes.

Risk
low risk

Do not pursue

Risk
high risk

Do not pursue

Strategic Alignment
peripheral to strategy

Assess Externally



Grantee Capacity
high

- Fund cross-agency coordination tools (e.g. dashboards, playbooks).
- Provide planning grants for stakeholder engagement and implementation readiness.

- Invest in pilot project funds with matching TA.
- Support peer-state learning networks and communities of practice.
- Fund communications strategy to document and share innovations.

Strategic Opportunity
low

Do not pursue

Strategic Opportunity
high

- Provide cohort-based technical assistance tailored to implementation planning.
- Fund intermediary partners to embed support in states.
- Launch rapid-response fund to act on quick-turn opportunities.

Grantee Capacity
low

Scenario #3: Should we support resource constrained diversity, equity and inclusion focused nonprofit organizations to respond to federal policy and funding requirements?

In response to evolving federal policy and political pressure, several agencies have revised their funding guidance and program requirements to avoid direct references to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Previously funded equity-focused initiatives, such as culturally responsive teaching, student well-being and community engagement—are either being deprioritized or stripped from eligibility criteria entirely.

A cohort of community-based and equity-focused nonprofits, many of which have built deep trust with historically underserved populations, now face an existential challenge. These organizations have long relied on federal partnerships and pass-through funding to support programming in public schools, particularly around educator development, family engagement and culturally responsive curricula. But with shifting policy rhetoric and legal threats against DEI frameworks, many are seeing their contracts paused, scopes narrowed or funding rescinded altogether. Most of these organizations operate with lean infrastructure and have limited capacity. Some are wrestling with whether and how to adapt their messaging without compromising core values. Others fear losing long-standing relationships with public institutions if they are perceived as politically risky grantees.

An intermediary has approached you with a proposal to provide short-term technical assistance and bridge funding for 10–12 equity-focused organizations. The support would enable grantees to: (1) navigate changing federal and state funding guidance, (2) revise proposals and communications materials, (3) assess legal exposure and adapt accordingly, and (4) build shared infrastructure, like compliance support or legal counsel, that they cannot afford individually. You're being asked to consider whether to provide flexible funding or join a rapid-response effort to stabilize the field and preserve equity-centered leadership.



Assess Internally

Strategic Alignment

core to strategy

**Proceed to
assess externally**

- Actions anchored in community and constituent needs can be more defensible.
- Supporting through intermediary-led TA may feel safe if framed as infrastructure support.
- Legal/comms TA framed as capacity-building.
- DEI funders see this as core to protecting equity infrastructure.

Pause

Seek legal advice and conduct more in-depth risk analysis.

- Public support may draw political backlash.
- Risk of being seen as ideologically partisan.
- Legal exposure in some states.
- Conflicts with funders avoiding advocacy or culture war topics.
- Unclear understanding of community needs and priorities.

Risk

low risk

Risk

high risk

Do not pursue

Do not pursue

Strategic Alignment

peripheral to strategy

Scenario #3

Assess Externally



Grantee Capacity

high

- Fund scenario planning, legal audits, and internal training to future-proof organizations.
- Support message testing and reframing work.

- Provide flexible general operating support to adapt programming and sustain momentum.
- Invest in cross-organization coalitions or shared campaigns to influence local/state policy shifts.

Strategic Opportunity

low

Strategic Opportunity

high

Do not pursue

- Provide rapid-response TA and capacity building.
- Fund organizing infrastructure or shared services to keep them in the game.

Grantee Capacity

low



Thank you!

