“So often we are working with social entrepreneurs and content experts who know their solutions and programs but find policy to be inaccessible and daunting. Policy at its best is just putting a frame around a good idea. It is a way to scale, redistribute power and influence, and bring our government closer to what’s going on in communities.”

— Sarah Groh, former Director of Advocacy, America Forward

In communities across the country, innovators and practitioners from the Reimagine Learning network were working to create learning environments that supported the academic and life success of all learners. We asked ourselves: how do we leverage the insights, expertise, and lessons learned from reimagining learning at the local level to create policies that will help scale at a state and national level what is working in communities? The social entrepreneurs and content experts in our network knew what solutions worked for students but were often daunted by the process of translating those solutions into policy, while being equally aware of the power of incorporating our network’s core beliefs about student learning into the policies that set the conditions for how the 14,000 school districts across the country operate.

As a part of its commitment to advancing systems-level change, in 2008 New Profit launched America Forward, a nonpartisan policy initiative that unites social innovators with policymakers to advance a public policy agenda that champions innovative and effective solutions. America Forward partnered with Reimagine Learning to bring together stakeholders from across the Reimagine Learning network to support district, state, and federal policy shifts to create space for innovation and experimentation in teaching and learning. These efforts provided an avenue for the insights and expertise surfacing about what was working in communities to be codified and scaled.
America Forward created the K-12 Education Work Group, comprising over 60 innovative education organizations who are focused on federal K-12 policy engagement efforts. Armed with a comprehensive co-developed K-12 Education Policy Platform to guide their work, the Work Group was focused on building the political will to empower, incentivize, and resource a comprehensive movement to transform education. Select members of the K-12 Education Work Group formed a Reimagine Learning Policy Work Group, which was made up of over 40 education organizations united by a shared commitment to diverse learners and a powerful set of policy priorities they collectively established through a year-long process facilitated by America Forward.

America Forward also provided training and capacity building supports to Reimagine Learning’s grantee-partners to help them develop and implement policy and advocacy strategies, and to identify and create opportunities for showcasing their work and impact through Capitol Hill briefings, meetings, and network conferences.

Impact

FEDERAL POLICY WINS
In 2015, the Reimagine Learning Policy Work Group was successful in securing key provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that were reflective of Reimagine Learning’s emphasis on personalized learning, equity, and access. These provisions were aimed at expanding high quality partnerships, scaling Universal Design for Learning to support all students, especially those with learning differences, advancing personalized learning, and diversifying the way we measure student success to include social emotional learning and competency-based measures. In 2016 and beyond, the Reimagine Learning Policy Work Group advocated for key priorities throughout the regulatory process to help shape how local school districts can leverage and implement the new law. Read more about America Forward’s ESSA policy platform here.

STATE-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT
Reimagine Learning and America Forward launched a partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers’ Innovation Lab Network (CCSSO-ILN), bringing together seven¹ state secretaries of education, members of their staff, and content experts from the Reimagine Learning network to share insights and develop practical resources for policy makers, advocates, and district leaders who aspire to implement best in class personalized learning efforts that design for the most vulnerable learners at the onset.

¹The seven states participating were CA, CO, KY, NH, VA, VT, and WI.
KNOWLEDGE SHARING
As an outgrowth of this partnership, CCSSO-ILN created a series of practical research and policy briefs developed with state and local education leaders in mind:

- A research review of policies and practices in the field that ensure access to personalized learning for students who have been historically underserved—*Equity and Personalized Learning: A Research Review*
- A report highlighting what it takes to bring this vision to life on the ground in schools and districts based on conversations with practitioners—*Voices from the Field: National Perspectives on Personalized Learning*

PRESIDENTIAL POLICY ADVOCACY
America Forward and the Reimagine Learning Policy Work Group was actively engaged in the 2016 election cycle—meeting the candidates and their teams out on the trail, facilitating policy briefings and roundtable conversations with coalition members and senior policy advisors to candidates on both sides of the aisle, and lifting up the community-driven solutions that network organizations are deploying across the country as proof points and scalable solutions.

POLICY ADVOCACY CAPACITY BUILDING
America Forward led robust advocacy trainings and town halls that elevated student voices and equipped advocates and nonprofits with the skills needed to navigate a shifting political climate. In September 2017, Reimagine Learning and America Forward brought dozens of nonprofit leaders to Washington, D.C. to build their policy advocacy skills as individuals, organizations, and a collective in service of meeting the needs of all learners, including learning about how to influence ESSA implementation and meeting with staffers and lawmakers on Capitol Hill to discuss critical budget priorities.

Lessons Learned

POLICY HAPPENS WHEN PREPARATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY
We were very intentional and focused in our efforts to form our Work Group, and we pulled together meaningful ideas that could be pursued through a number of different vehicles, depending on the opportunities that arose. When ESSA unexpectedly came up for reauthorization, we had the opportunity to influence it because we had laid the groundwork to put forward innovative ideas from our Coalition’s existing K-12 education policy platform and priorities. Our success in securing key provisions in ESSA then gave us a foothold for further work we would do in ESSA’s implementation.
THE CONSTRAINTS SURROUNDING POLICY CHANGE CAN BE LEVERAGED AS AN ASSET

Reimagine Learning’s overall vision of success had a long-term focus, but we knew that we needed to make incremental policy change to support this vision of success. To that end, we relied on the short windows for influence created by the Congressional cycles in order to build a sense of urgency and momentum for our work. Our Work Group also had bold and expansive discussions, but this external framework — as well as the fact that we were accountable for reporting back to funders, partners, and students — meant that we needed to adhere to a strict timeline.

IT IS ESSENTIAL TO KEEP THE LONG GAME IN MIND

Our approach was to build strong relationships, circling back to many of our same contacts and building capital and coalitions over time. This made our work much more sustainable over the long-term, rather than trying to push efforts through without having those pre-existing foundational relationships.

TO HAVE SYSTEMS-LEVEL IMPACT, SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS MUST BUILD THEIR POLICY ADVOCACY MUSCLES

Over time, New Profit has evolved to focus on supporting social entrepreneurs to become system entrepreneurs who can wise organize and adapt their organizations to address the aspects of the systems in which they operate so that they can positively affect the lives of as many people as possible. Policy can feel inaccessible as a social entrepreneur but it is one of the most critical elements to shaping a system. We must build the capacity of social entrepreneurs to engage in shaping public policies that influence definitions of success, assessment, budget spending, school structures, and regulations that impact each and every student and their learning experience.