

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS Strengthening School Leadership

Driving Instructional Improvement

May 2025



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STRENGTHENING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: DRIVING INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

How might you rethink school leadership and school system conditions to drive instructional improvement at scale? The Barr Foundation requests proposals from leaders in Massachusetts public Local Education Agencies, including districts and charter organizations, who are ready to reflect on school leadership in their contexts and engage in instructional leadership initiatives to drive systemic improvements. To be eligible, districts must have at least six schools serving a minimum of 2500 students, including at least one high school serving a minimum of 950 students in grades 9-12. Districts who do not meet these requirements as standalone systems may partner with one or more school districts in order to maximize the impact of this opportunity. Districts are invited to apply for a grant of up to \$200,000 over 18-24 months to support efforts to discover and create the conditions needed to ensure that principals drive instructional practice towards success for all students. Over the course of two school years, selected districts will engage in a process of reflection and planning, identifying an external partner with expertise in leadership and instruction to pursue pilot implementation and future visioning towards systemic change. Beyond the grant, additional Barr-funded support will include planning with Attuned Education Partners and collaboration with a research partner to construct a learning agenda that elevates key insights as the project evolves. At the end of the grant period, Barr will consider invitations for cohort members to apply for multi-year implementation grant funding starting in the 2027-2028 school year to leverage early progress to drive deeper, sustained impact.

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OVERVIEW

About the Barr Foundation and its Education Program

The Barr Foundation's mission is to invest in human, natural, and creative potential, serving as thoughtful stewards and catalysts. Based in Boston, Barr focuses regionally, and selectively engages nationally, working in partnership with nonprofits, foundations, the public sector, and civic and business leaders to elevate the arts, advance solutions for climate change, and connect all students to success in high school and beyond. Founded in 1997, Barr now has assets of nearly \$2.8 billion, and has contributed more than \$1 billion to charitable causes.

Barr's core values are held at the center of grantmaking across all program areas:

Strive for impact - We aspire to advance ambitious solutions to big challenges.

Invest in leaders - We support effective, visionary and collaborative leaders, as they drive change.

Center racial equity - We aim to address structural racism, inequality, and power imbalances.

Act with humility - We recognize the privilege inherent to philanthropic work and trust our partners to lead.

Take the long view - We consider how today's decisions will impact future generations.

Embrace risk - We accept that bold action requires comfort with the risk of failure.

Demonstrate curiosity - We invite new perspectives to inform our work and to help us learn

The Barr Foundation's Education Program strives to advance excellence and equity for all young people with a particular focus on the high school years, a vitally important period in their lives. We envision public high schools across New England that have been transformed to provide relevant and rigorous learning experiences that help students thrive and leave them ready for college, career, and life. We pursue this goal via three interconnected strategies:

- 1. We **Build Public Will** by supporting partners who elevate the experiences and voices of students, parents, and educators to build awareness and shape the conditions that incentivize excellence and equity in schools.
- 2. We **Catalyze New Models** by supporting school leaders to collaborate with their communities to plan, prepare, and take action to advance excellence and equity in their schools.
- 3. We **Invest in Educators** by partnering with organizations that build a diverse, skilled, and effective workforce of teachers, school leaders, and system leaders who deliver high-quality instruction and bring new school models to life.

This opportunity is part of the **Invest in Educators strategy.** To support student success during and after high school, school systems need to consistently provide high-quality learning experiences from K-12 across all of their schools. We believe that school leaders are vitally important for driving the necessary improvements in instruction that support excellent learning and life outcomes for all students. There may be no clearer path to these outcomes than by ensuring that every school is led by a

highly-effective principal working within an aligned, coherent strategy for driving instructional improvement at the school and system level.

Like all of our work across the Barr Foundation, the Invest in Educators strategy is grounded in our core values which have shaped this new opportunity. While each value is deeply important, in a climate of increasing uncertainty within public education, it is important to be explicit about what our core value of centering racial equity means for this opportunity. We believe excellence and opportunity belong equally to students of every race. In recently released data from the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, Massachusetts ranked as the highest performing state across all tested grades and subjects. The sobering reality is that this "best in the nation" overall performance masks that Black and Hispanic students in Massachusetts were roughly half as likely to reach proficiency compared with state averages. Centering racial equity means that these disparities in outcomes by racial groups, as well as disparities by other historically marginalized identities, are an indication that there is unfinished business to ensure that demography is not destiny. In short, there is no excellence without equity, particularly racial equity.

This opportunity may be aligned to your school system if your team:

- Is committed to a belief that all students are capable of achieving at high levels and is willing to interrogate disparities in data to understand progress
- Believes that the role of the principal is essential to driving instructional change to improve student outcomes
- Seeks to improve school leader efficacy and retention by thinking systemically
- Values learning within your context and contributing to the knowledge of the education sector
- Values cross functional teamwork between district leaders, school leaders, and teachers to implement cohesive instructional change across the context
- Is committed to leading a multi-year change effort in ultimate service of student success

The History of the Strengthening School Leadership Initiative

In 2018, Barr sought to more deeply understand the challenges of sourcing, supporting, and retaining strong school principals in Massachusetts. With support from Attuned Education Partners, Barr convened a working group of school leaders and other education stakeholders from across the state to explore ways to increase the principal effectiveness. <u>The resulting final report</u> in 2019 recommended actions tailored to state policymakers, school system leaders, principal preparation programs, and funders. These actions focused on four core challenges: preparation, scope, coaching, and representation.

Barr then launched an initial <u>request for proposals (RFP)</u> for planning grants for Massachusetts districts paired with multi-month support from Attuned to further explore local contexts' specific needs to ensure a high-quality principal in every school. The chosen districts made up the first Strengthening School Leadership Cohort, and in spite of pandemic-impacted timelines, they exited the planning process with identified external provider partners and codified plans, ultimately receiving multi-year implementations grants from Barr in 2020 to continue their work. The outcomes of these founding projects within the Strengthen School Leadership (SSL) Initiative have generated significant learning and early signs of progress, inspiring the ongoing curiosity and commitment from the Barr Foundation as we open up this new opportunity.

While each district's context, challenges, and solutions varied, some early signs of progress for the sites included:

- Improvements in school leader retention against broader state and national trends– While leader retention rates at the state level decreased by 2 percentage points between the 19-20 and 22-23 school years, most districts in the cohort have seen notable increases, with one system increasing their retention rate by 12 percentage points.
- An increase in principal and assistant principal diversity, also outpacing broader trends-Since the 19-20 school year, most cohort districts saw increases in the racial diversity of their staff, with some showing increases for teachers and leaders specifically. This is particularly notable given growing evidence on the positive impact on students from having teachers of color and the role administrators of color play in attracting and retaining those teachers. While these numbers still aren't representative of the racial diversity of students served, the districts see this metric as an encouraging sign that they are trending in a positive direction.
- **Greater understanding of the capacities and strengths of leaders and their teams** Cohort district leaders report having a better understanding of the skill sets and leadership capacities within their systems after working with numerous stakeholders across schools and teams through this work. While most school leaders still report challenges in spending sufficient time focused on instructional leadership, deepening capacity and knowledge of strengths allows for greater distributed leadership.

Over the last five years the following key learnings have also been helpful in advancing the cohort's efforts:

- Emphasis on the Quality of Instruction– Districts realized that building infrastructure for strong and supported school leadership alone would not shift student outcomes unless leaders were also grounded in a high quality instructional vision for their schools. Principals in the participating districts elevated the ongoing tension related to the broad scope of their role with the need to maintain consistent attention to instructional leadership. Some districts focused on ways to ensure high quality instructional materials in every classroom, while others sought ways to free up time for school leaders to focus on instructional observation, coaching, and feedback through leadership teams. While all original districts report having better infrastructure to support school leadership towards instructional improvement as well as bright spots of progress among their schools, achieving improvements in student academic outcomes at scale remains a ripe area of focus over three years into implementation.
- Stakeholder Engagement– Districts discovered that participation and buy-in of a broad set of stakeholders proximate to instruction (e.g. district central office, principal, administrators, coaches, teachers/teacher leaders, academic/curriculum/assessment heads) led to smoother and more aligned implementation. Some sites that pursued a model for instructional improvement that delayed engagement with teachers and teacher leaders met more resistance during implementation than those who consistently engaged key stakeholders from the outset. Involving a broader set of stakeholders early in the change efforts seemed to support deeper understanding of the purpose behind shifts as they came.

- External Provider Partnership- Each site engaged an external provider that brought particular expertise in areas such as leadership development, coaching, change management, and adult professional learning to support their work from the beginning of implementation. These close partnerships not only developed the capacity of district and school teams, but also allowed each district to work through challenges with an outside partner's unique perspective, leading to deeper understanding and more creative problem solving.
- **Coherence** In a world of competing commitments—especially as these districts navigated the impact of the pandemic on their students, schools, and communities—coherence across myriad district strategies became an emerging theme. Over time, many districts have come to see this Strengthening School Leadership initiative not as a side project, but as core and central to their overall strategic change work. As such, ensuring alignment with other priorities as they sought deeper coherence was necessary.
- This work takes time- Over the five years since the initial planning grants, the first cohort of Strengthening School Leadership districts feel they have significantly strengthened their systems and structures around school leadership and seen improvements in the quality of professional learning and school leader retention; however, there is more work to be done to accelerate student outcomes across the districts. Barr's ability to take the long view while still defining success through concrete results for young people has allowed sites to evolve their work and to ensure their leadership development work is deeply tied to instructional improvement towards improved student outcomes.

All questions related to the RFP should be submitted to **EducationRFP@barrfoundation.org**.

OPPORTUNITY DETAILS

Building upon the progress and learnings of the initial Strengthening School Leadership cohort that launched in 2020, Barr is launching a request for proposals (RFP) to invite a new cohort of Massachusetts districts to reflect on school leadership in their own contexts and pursue planning and pilot implementation of instructional leadership initiatives to drive systemic improvements. This initial funding will support efforts to discover and create the conditions needed to ensure that principals drive instructional practice towards success for all students, and that these leaders and their teams feel supported and developed in their efforts. We are seeking districts interested or already engaged in aligned work that bring curiosity, a willingness to learn, and desire to become a site of learning for others.

Over the course of the grant spanning two school years (up to 18-24 months), selected districts will engage in a process to unpack unique local opportunities and challenges related to leadership, instruction, system coherence, and student outcomes, centering the principal and school leadership as a key lever to drive change. Shifting instructional practices to drive stronger learning outcomes for all students requires a shared vision across the system, from the classroom to the central office. In order to sustain a multi-year change effort, we invite school system leaders to bring educators at all levels of the system to the table from the start as they plan, partner with external providers, and pilot efforts to strengthen school leadership to drive instructional improvement.

Barr has retained Attuned Education Partners as in-kind support for the selected grant recipients throughout their plan development. As experts in strategic planning, systems transformation, leadership development, and instructional improvement, Attuned will support the districts in assessing their strengths and gaps related to student outcomes, instructional leadership, and system-wide coherence. This discovery process will serve as the foundation for districts' design of a pilot implementation plan to be launched in the 2026-2027 school year that addresses one or more challenges related to instructional leadership. Barr will also retain a research partner that will support grant recipients in efforts to codify learnings through implementation, informing district decision-making and elevating critical learning for the field.

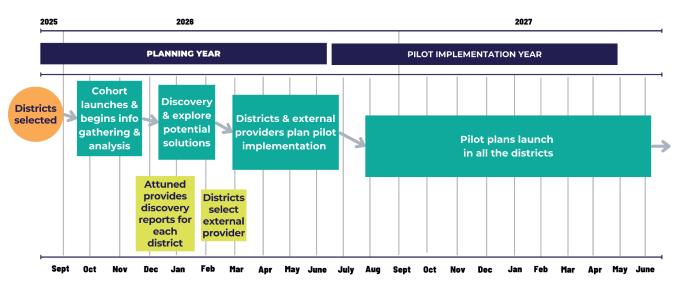
Applicants are invited to apply for grants of up to \$200,000 for this planning and pilot implementation phase. Grant funds are primarily designed to support engagement with internal stakeholders, planning and design with the external partner that each district identifies, and subsequent pilot implementation with that partner during the 2026-2027 school year. Additional grant funded activities could include, but are not limited to: professional learning, travel, professional reading, limited project management, and capacity building. In addition to the district-specific grants, in-kind support from Attuned Education Partners and from the research partner is provided for all selected districts in this second cohort.

Planning Process

All selected cohort members will undertake an initial planning process with Attuned Education Partners that centers a vision for excellence and equity for all students, and explicitly centers the experience of students in the school district who have been furthest from opportunity. Attuned will help ensure that the implementation plans developed are grounded in an understanding of local context and challenges, informed by exploration of research-based potential solutions that align to those challenges, as well as lessons learned from the similar work of others. The phases include:

- 1. **Information Gathering and Analysis:** Collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data to formulate a comprehensive picture of the current leadership context, instructional core, and trends in student outcomes. (September December, 2025)
- 2. **Discovery of Potential Solutions:** Explore options for strengthening instructional practice through leveraging the role of leadership in strategic change management. These might include aligning principal preparation and development with district needs, establishing methods for understanding the effectiveness of leadership strategies, or exploring ways to implement key instructional initiatives while managing change across diverse stakeholders. Part of this phase will include the district's selection of an external provider and the co-construction of metrics with the Barr-selected research partner to track progress through the change process. (January February, 2026)
- 3. **Planning for Pilot Implementation:** As districts select the strategies likely to have the greatest impacts on the principal role and instructional quality within the specific context, Attuned will assist districts and their external partners to design a plan for grant funds that will positively impact the districts' school leaders in service of improved student outcomes. Grant funds can support pilot programming for up to 14 months, beginning in July, 2026. (March June, 2026)

During the 2026-2027 school year, Barr will consider invitations for cohort members to apply for multi-year grant funding for the 2027-2028 school year and beyond in order to scale and/or significantly deepen their instructional leadership work.



Strengthening School Leadership: Driving Instructional Change District Timeline

The Learning and Evaluation Process

This new planning and pilot implementation opportunity is aligned with the Barr Foundation's interest in codifying and sharing learning related to efforts to strengthen school leadership in Massachusetts. There have been several anecdotal learnings captured through the work of the first cohort and we are excited to systematically capture and share that learning broadly to the field. To accomplish this, Barr will retain a research partner starting in 2025 to help construct a learning and evaluation agenda related to the Strengthening School Leadership Initiative. This research agenda will be informed by and designed to serve the learning needs of selected districts with two primary purposes: (1) augmenting each districts' ability to track progress over the course of the initiative with expert external support; and (2) informing the field of salient themes and trends that emerge to drive improvements in instructional practice through strengthening school leadership. We are pursuing a vision where our districts, their partners, and education leaders across the state and beyond learn more and achieve more because of this research.

During this grant period, selected districts can expect less frequent but meaningful engagement with the research partner to ensure research questions and products provide the actionable insights that will support districts' future, multi-year implementation plans. As Barr pursues the opportunity to codify and share learnings with the field around this initiative, it is important that any learning and evaluation activities provide true value to our districts and partners.

While the bulk of research activities associated with this learning agenda will focus on a later phase of multi-year implementation, research activities will likely include efforts to gather qualitative and quantitative data on stakeholder perspectives, observed shifts in classroom instructional practices, and evidence of student learning and achievement over time to better understand what is working, why it is working, and how others might pursue similar efforts.

TIMELINE

Grant Application

May 5 - Request for Proposals (RFP) released May 19 - Webinar for prospective applicants at 4:00 PM ET (This will also be recorded.) May 21 - June 6 - Optional conference call during Barr staff office hours June 30 - Proposals due

Selected finalist proposals will be contacted in late July for follow-up virtual calls and provided with written feedback on proposals, with revisions due by August 29th. Finalists will also be asked to hold time in fall, 2025 for programming launch activities. Awards will be announced and funds will be released to districts in mid-October; public announcements to follow.

All RFP materials and updates will be provided on the <u>Strengthening School Leadership</u>: <u>Driving</u> <u>Instructional Improvement page</u> as they become available.

Questions related to the RFP, Webinar RSVP's, Office Hours Signups, and Proposals should all be submitted to **EducationRFP@barrfoundation.org**.

APPLICANT ELIGIBILITY

Eligibility Requirements:

- **Entity:** Public Local Education Agencies (LEAs), including districts and charter organizations, in Massachusetts are eligible to apply. A group or regional consortium/collaborative of LEAs or schools organized around common goals or interests may also apply. This opportunity is not a fit for single site LEAs applying alone.
- District Characteristics*:
 - At least 6 schools, including at least one high school
 - A total student enrollment of at least 2500 students
 - As Barr views the high school experience as pivotal to a student's life trajectory, we are seeking districts that serve at least 950 students in grades 9-12

*Districts who do not meet these requirements as standalone systems may partner with one or more school districts in order to maximize the impact of this opportunity.

All proposals meeting entity and district characteristic criteria will be considered. Current Barr grantees interested in applying are encouraged to reach out to their program officer to discuss opportunities to align this project with current district priorities. In alignment with our commitment to centering racial equity, we are particularly interested in strong proposals from applicants serving significant populations of students who are systemically underserved as evidenced by differences in student outcomes across demographic indicators.

Key Commitments

Districts selected to this cohort commit to:

- Building a cross-functional working team of district leaders, school leaders, and teachers to lead this work in their context.
- Regularly convening, consulting, and engaging key stakeholders impacted by efforts to improve instruction, like district central office leaders in areas like academics, curriculum, assessment, principals, school-based administrators, coaches, teachers and teacher leaders, etc.
- Partnering with Attuned Education Partners to develop implementation plans tailored to the unique needs of their context.
- Collaborating with a research partner (selected by Barr) to develop data-based outcomes measurement strategies to both support the district's own learning throughout planning, but also to support implementation plans and learnings for the broader field.
- Attending annual cohort convenings and other activities for collective learning with other cohort members.

As a partner to selected districts, The Barr Foundation commits to:

- Covering costs associated with creating a context-specific needs-based plan through direct grants to districts and through covering the cost of technical assistance from Attuned and the research partner
- Being an engaged thought partner throughout the process, encouraging ambitious solutions that strive to see every student thriving academically through high school and graduating ready for college, career, and life.
- Taking the long view and embracing risk so that as the selected cohort begins, and plans and change efforts develop, work may evolve naturally.

Attuned Education Partners Commits to:

- Accompanying each district on its journey to analyze its strengths and challenges as related to instructional leadership, and supporting each district to develop a theory of change that emerges from their data-driven self-assessment.
- Ensuring each context, in partnership with its selected external partner, develops an implementation plan that supports the district's theory of change.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Please download and complete this application template

Email all application materials to **EducationRFP@barrfoundation.org** by 5 p.m. on Monday, June 30, 2025. Materials should be in pdf, Word, or Excel document format. Please embed any links within the documents.

A. Organization Information

The "Lead Applicant" (this will be the direct recipient of grant funds, if awarded) will supply:

- District name
- District street, city, state, and zip code
- Main phone
- Website URL
- Organization tax ID
- Start of fiscal year
- Name, title, phone, and email of chief executive (superintendent) of your district
- Name, title, phone, and email of staff person managing this request other than the chief executive (optional)
- Name, title, phone, and email of lead development staff person handling this request (optional)
- Organizational chart
- 501(c)(3) Determination Letter, if applicable

B. Budget Information

- Start of fiscal year
- Grant amount requested (up to \$200,000)
- Grant line-item budget on the use of up to \$200,000 using the provided <u>budget template</u> for an 18 to 24-month grant period (starting October 2025). These funds *cannot* be used for ongoing operating costs of any school or program, nor can they be used on facilities-related expenses. We expect the proposed budget to align to both the vision of the proposal narrative and the intended outputs and outcomes.

C. Proposal Narrative (please limit to no more than 6-10 pages)

Please submit a narrative proposal describing the current interests, strengths, and opportunities to strengthen district systems and structures to enable principals to drive instructional improvement towards increasingly equitable and excellent student outcomes. In this section, please outline how you would use this planning and pilot implementation grant opportunity to learn, plan, and begin to significantly strengthen that work. Be sure to answer the questions below:

- 1. **Summary of Proposed Work**: In no more than 3-4 sentences, summarize what you hope to focus on within your district(s) through this opportunity to strengthen school leadership and drive instructional improvement.
- 2. **State of Instruction:** What is the current state of instructional practice and student learning outcomes in your district(s)? Who is being served well by current practice and who is not? Be sure to describe how you know this, highlighting evidence as appropriate.

- 3. Leadership Strengths and Opportunities: What strengths do you have to build upon and where do you hope to grow in the coming years? What are the primary opportunities for change in your district(s) related to ensuring high-quality school leadership drives instructional improvements and improved student outcomes within your site(s)?
- 4. **Coherence and Alignment:** In what ways is your district or set of districts well positioned to take this work on now? Be sure to indicate how the priorities of this opportunity align with current, enumerated strategic priorities (eg. publicly available strategic plans, etc.). *Current Barr grantees should be sure to communicate alignment with any other Barr-funded projects.*
- 5. Past or Current Work and Partnerships: Do you have any strategies, programs, or initiatives currently in place aligned with an effort to strengthen school leadership and/or drive instructional improvement? If applicable, please share the names of and experiences with any recent or current external partners working with your district(s) on aligned bodies of work along with any learning that has come through these partnerships.
- 6. Learning Goals: What are you hoping to learn through this grant opportunity? How will this grant advance your understanding of your school leadership capacity and instructional strengths, challenges, and potential solutions? What gaps do you have (capacity or information) that may inhibit your ability to fully understand challenges related to ensuring high-quality school leadership and instructional quality and developing a plan for potential solutions?
- 7. **Managing Change:** Driving instructional improvement through strengthening school leadership likely implicates a range of important stakeholders within your context. Which constituencies do you believe will be important to bring into the planning and pilot implementation process from the beginning? If you anticipate potential resistance to change, are there any stakeholders that will be particularly important to support successful future implementation?
- 8. Working Group: Given the important stakeholders, who will be the key members of the working group responsible for launching this initiative within your district(s) and who will lead the group? Please provide letters of commitment from the superintendent (or equivalent) of each participating district. If additional letters of support are also available, please submit those as well.
 - a. Please describe your proposed working group members and group leader, including:
 - i. At least one system-level leader
 - ii. At least one school-level leader, preferably at the high school level and how their roles are situated within the broader school and district context (e.g. their influence over key decisions).
 - b. Please describe what structures are in place or may need to be created for these working group members to regularly collaborate, lead change efforts, and include other stakeholders (e.g. students, staff, families, external partners, and community members)?
 - c. Please also identify a lead data contact who will support the working group's efforts.
 - d. Please describe your anticipated strategy for working group members to regularly convene and engage stakeholders (students, staff, families, etc.) in this planning phase, and then how you anticipate engaging them during pilot implementation.

D. Grant Period Outputs and Outcomes

Applicants provide up to five outcomes and up to five outputs that outline what you are hoping to achieve if you are selected to participate in this planning process and pilot implementation. An <u>output</u> is a concrete deliverable that your team plans to produce.. Outputs should showcase major milestones along an 18 to 24-month planning and pilot implementation process and be as specific as possible. An <u>outcome</u> is the result of planning process activities, often expressed in terms of changes in behavior, norms, decision-making, knowledge, attitudes, capacities, motivations, skills, or conditions for the stakeholders involved. Strong outcomes represent what your team is intending to accomplish through the delivery of an output. Preference quality over quantity, focusing on what will be most important for success over this time period and how you will know. Please refer to the Barr Foundation <u>outcomes and outputs reference document</u> for additional guidance.

Feel free to incorporate some of the below examples to form your outputs and outcomes. Be sure to note how they will be measured by your team:

Outputs should be time-bound, measurable, and should consider:

- Your Vision: What do you expect to accomplish during this planning and pilot implementation period? What will be most important for success?
- Local Stakeholders: What goals do you have around assembling and meeting regularly over the grant period with an internal working group? Do you have communications goals for other key stakeholders impacted by this work?
- **Key Commitments:** What milestones will keep you accountable to commitments to share timely information and plan alongside Attuned? What about the research partner?
- **Key Deliverables:** When do you hope to have a contract in place with an external partner for the pilot? When do you hope to have a multi-year implementation proposal ready?

Outcomes should be a result of completing your outputs, observable within the grant timeline, and aligned with a strong start towards strengthening school leadership to drive instructional improvement in your context. You may consider:

- **Stakeholders:** How would you know that you have the buy-in you will likely need to sustain a multi-year change effort?
- Learning: How will you know that you've landed on the right questions and ways of learning to have the external research partner support monitoring progress from pilot to future implementation?
- **Plan:** How will you know that you've landed on the right plan with the right partner supported by the right stakeholders?

Complete applications should include all the following documents:

- <u>A completed application template</u>
- <u>A completed budget template</u>
- Letters of commitment from the superintendent (or equivalent) of each participating district.

Email all application materials to <u>EducationRFP@barrfoundation.org</u> by 5:00 p.m. on Monday, June 30, 2025.