

VELA Education Fund

2021 End-of-Year Report



VELA
EDUCATION FUND

In 2021, VELA Met the Moment



It's a little hard for me to believe given how much has happened, but 2021 was VELA's first full year in operation. We were a young organization with a small team, but amidst an ongoing pandemic and continued disruption to children's educational experiences, we did everything we could to meet the moment.

In practice, this looked like VELA awarding more than 780 grants totaling over \$8 million to everyday entrepreneurs pursuing new, alternative ways to support learners. VELA's 2021 grant recipients reside in 49 states, plus Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. More than 50 percent of VELA grantees identify as people of color.

I believe the key to VELA's rapid impact is our grantmaking philosophy, which is long on trust and short on paperwork. We fund students, parents, teachers, and community members, and we want these passionate individuals to focus their time serving their communities and customers, rather than conforming to the needs of funders and systems. Because of this low barrier to entry, we saw extraordinary

demand for our three grantmaking rounds in 2021, with more than 50 applications a day on average during our most recent microgrant round and 162 applications for our bridge grant round, which saw six applicants selected.

This end-of-year report sheds light on the impact our grantees are making. We support nontraditional educational opportunities, and some of the ways we measure impact—and our grantees measure impact—are nontraditional. You won't see any state test score increases cited in this report. What you will see are stories of incredible demand for our grantees' programs, of delight-driven learning, and of children and families in every corner of this country leading lives that align with their values.

I can't wait to continue this work in 2022.

Thank you for all of your support of VELA Education Fund, and stay tuned!

Meredith Olson

Meredith Olson, President

VELA

- 1 awards grants
- 2 elevates its grantees.

Here's how VELA impacted millions of families in 2021.



In 2021, VELA awarded

MORE THAN

780 grants in



49 states
+3 territories

OVER

\$8M
to everyday
entrepreneurs

Of those grantees,

53%

identified as people
of color

45%

identified as
entrepreneurs

52%

led nontraditional
learning environments

In 2021, VELA offered two types of grants: microgrants and bridge grants. Microgrants are our earliest stage of funding. These awards of up to \$25,000 address a key gap in philanthropy by helping turn ideas into practice and begin serving communities. Most grants VELA awarded in 2021 were microgrants. Bridge grants are larger grants for more established organizations that are ready to bridge to broader adoption, whether it's to another audience, another region, and through a new pilot. VELA awarded six bridge grants in 2021.

In 2021, VELA released **29 videos** that were viewed more than **2 million times**.



Grantees were also featured in dozens of media outlets including:



... and high-profile conferences including:



CONNECTIONS

Grantees connect through VELA's team and on their own. For the Fall 2021 microgrant round, 50% of applicants came to us through referral from a VELA grantee or partner.

**MARCH
2021**

VELA released a video highlighting Surf Skate Science, a South Florida nonprofit that teaches STEM skills through action sports. The video was viewed more than 200,000 times, including by Bart Keeton, who lives in Oklahoma.



**JULY
2021**

Keeton is a dad and the founder of Engage Learning Oklahoma, which teaches STEM skills through hands-on, project-based activities (think a solar-powered smartphone charger). Keeton stumbled upon the Surf Skate Science video, watched it, and, when VELA's next grant application opened, he applied. Engage Learning Oklahoma was awarded a \$150,000 grant.

**NOVEMBER
2021**

As part of VELA's work elevating grantees, Engage Learning Oklahoma was the focus of a local news story in Tulsa. A top official in the Cherokee Nation saw the story and reached out to Keeton about piloting a partnership. Keeton also presented during one of VELA's regular calls with its grantees. The team behind Nova Labs, a makerspace in Keeton's native northern Virginia, joined his breakout room and followed up afterward. Keeton is heading back to northern Virginia over the holidays, and he's scheduled a visit with Nova Labs.



Grantee Spotlight: La Luz Education (Denver, CO)

La Luz is a mobile microschool serving Latinx middle school students in southwest Denver. The program, founded by former public school principal Kyle Gamba, is organized around 3-to-6-week immersion experiences and one-week deep dives into fields of study that students are passionate about, such as cooking, animal rights, or mural art. Said one student during the immersion experience at the Denver Zoo: "It's cool because instead of sitting at a desk in a classroom, I'm learning all kinds of things I wouldn't have [otherwise]. And my middle school is the zoo right now. It's fun!" [Read more](#)

FUELING GROWTH

For many grantees, VELA's award is the first financial support they've received, but not the last. In just the last three months of 2021, three organizations that received microgrants from VELA announced seven-figure investment rounds.

Boddle Learning
raised

\$1.35 M

KaiPod Learning
raised

\$1.5 M

Curious Cardinals
raised

\$4.35 M



KaiPod's founder, Amar Kumar, wrote that VELA's award "was our first grant and helped us run the summer pilot, which proved so successful that it gave us the confidence to launch this fall!"

For nonprofit grantees, VELA's award was also a catalyst to receive downstream funding, including:

Engaged Detroit
received a

\$25,000

grant from Guardian
Industries

Firehouse Dream
received a

\$100,000

award from Sony
Alpha

Weird Enough
Productions received the

\$300,000

Elevate Prize

LIVES IMPACTED

VELA funds an array of nontraditional learning environments, content and learning materials, supports for students, and supports for families. In doing so, VELA responds to the demands that grantees convey on behalf of their communities. In this grantmaking context, it's neither feasible nor desirable to fit this work into neat boxes of standardized metrics.

Instead, VELA communicates with its grantees on a regular basis—from an active Facebook group to regular community-wide surveys—and learns of the growing impact its grantees are making.

Sometimes, a single life changes. It can be a student, like Victoria Bradley, who was ready to drop out of high school during the pandemic. Her mom, Bernita, received a grant from VELA to launch a homeschool co-op, and today Victoria is a freshman on scholarship at Wayne State University. It can also be a parent, like Karla Withrow, whose son was set to start kindergarten during the pandemic. As a former early childhood educator, Karla didn't want him on screens during remote school, so with support from

VELA, she created EarthChild Explorers, a nature-based microschool. Karla quit her job and now leads the program full-time.

Sometimes, more lives change. Two years ago, Katie Saiz ran an early childhood program with 10 students. Then, in 2020, she received a VELA grant and expanded to include a K-5 microschool with 37 students. Now, aided by a second grant from VELA, Katie's program, Green Gate Children's School, serves 59 students.

These examples are being replicated hundreds of times in every state in the country.



Victoria Bradley, now a freshman at Wayne State University



Grantee Spotlight: Humboldt Park Montessori (Chicago, IL)

The Montessori education model has historically not been as accessible to families with lower incomes, so Kristen Ediger introduced a new sliding-scale tuition model to be more inclusive of families on Chicago's west side. Ediger is a mom and founder of Humboldt Park Montessori, an independent school serving 54 students ages three to 12. The school is adjacent to a public garden, and students have the opportunity to engage in nature-based learning on a daily basis. Said Ediger, "We believe this tuition model could be replicated to support many other nontraditional learning environments, making a high-quality education more equitable." [Read more](#)

LEARNING FROM GRANTEES

In 2021, VELA surveyed its most recent grantees to learn what they value, how they think about success and impact, what they need to provide high-quality programs and grow, and what they want to learn about from other grantees, families, or learners. Nearly 80 percent of grantees responded, and their open-ended answers created a fascinating picture of the nontraditional education landscape. We read thousands of survey responses and coded them.

A full report will be released in early 2022; for now, here are a few highlights:

1 Nontraditional learning happens at home and in the community. It is easy to assume that nontraditional learning is an isolated activity (e.g., a stereotypical single-family homeschool). VELA grantees suggest that there is a much wider range of interaction between family-based and community-based models. Nearly 75% of grantees serve learners in their own family, and yet, 80% of grantees also serve learners outside of their family. About half of grantees do both.

2 Grants primarily fund learning environments. Most grantees (64%) said that their program includes a nontraditional learning environment. Of those programs providing nontraditional learning environments, nearly half (46%) are supporting homeschooling as a homeschool co-op or a homeschooling program. A quarter (26%) are microschools.

3 Grantees prioritize responsive, equitable learning experiences over traditional measures of student achievement.

Grantees value educational experiences that focus on the whole child, build community and connection, personalize learning, and build deep, relevant skills. They also prioritize providing opportunities for learners that they wouldn't otherwise have, and ensuring equitable access to those opportunities.

4 The way grantees define and measure success is consistent with their values. Grantees believe that their programs are having the desired impact if there is demand for what they are doing; learners and families are engaged, enthusiastic, and enjoy the experience; and learners are flourishing, demonstrating that they feel cared for, are building self-esteem and confidence, and are realizing their potential.

5 Grantees need tactical support for managing and growing their organizations. Many grantees are young and fledgling organizations. Most report that their most pressing needs are related to day-to-day operational challenges and planning for growth. The opportunity to connect with and learn from the VELA community is a unique one, and presents VELA with high-impact opportunities to be a connector and accelerator.

PARTNERS

VELA distributes grants directly and through partner organizations that also support nontraditional educational opportunities. Partners include:

CAMELBACK
ventures



Grantee Spotlight: WhatupHomee (Kansas City, MO)

Created by Black homeschoolers for Black homeschoolers, WhatupHomee is an online community and platform that enables Black homeschoolers to meet up regardless of geographical location. WhatupHomee founder and longtime homeschooler Mishawnda Mintz says that Black families have been homeschooling for decades, but that they struggled to find and connect with other Black homeschoolers locally. So while homeschooling her four children, Mintz started an online community for Black families like her own who were choosing to homeschool. “It was important for us to be able to connect with other homeschooling families that looked like us,” Mintz said. “Homeschooling can be isolating, and the cultural differences were somewhat alienating. So I wanted to create a hub for Black homeschoolers to find each other.” [Read more](#)

WE'RE JUST GETTING STARTED



Late in 2021, VELA hired three additional people, which doubled the size of its team.

With more capacity, VELA aims to do even more in 2022. More grants are on tap, including a new in-between option larger than microgrants but smaller than bridge grants that VELA is developing based on grantees' needs. A new community platform is in development so grantees can connect with each other more easily. And plans are underway for a resource library that will make nontraditional learning environments simpler to sustain. Stay tuned for much more from VELA in 2022. Sign up for our newsletter at velaedfund.org/connect.



Katie Saiz of Green Gate Children's School in Wichita, Kansas



Grantee Spotlight: Mountaineer Homeschool Hub (Morgantown, WV)

Angie Channell started homeschooling her son because he was being bullied in school. He graduated from high school, but Channell launched the Mountaineer Homeschool Hub to reach more students in her creative and engaging courses. Offerings include Poetry for the Young, Road Trip USA, Grossology, and the Science of Ancient Civilizations. Enrollment has jumped from 8 before the pandemic to 36 as of April 2021. "As you can imagine, Grossology has been a class that involves a lot of laughter and fun, but students are learning about the human body, science, and health," said Channell. "Learning is so much more effective when presented through hands-on activities and narrative. It helps students connect with the content and really absorb its importance." [Read more](#)

Thanks for your support, and see you in 2022!