



E information@edfunders.org
W edfunders.org

P 503.595.2100

NEWS RELEASE

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Contact:

communications@edfunders.org

503-595-2100

Grantmakers for Education Announces 2026 IgnitED Award Winners

Annual awards recognize education philanthropy leaders and partnerships expanding opportunity and driving meaningful change for learners.

NEW YORK, NY — [Grantmakers for Education](https://www.edfunders.org) today announced the winners of its 2026 IgnitED Awards, honoring individuals and partnerships whose leadership, creativity and collaboration are helping strengthen education and expand opportunities for learners. Now in their third year, the IgnitED Awards recognize the many ways education philanthropy can make a difference, from championing bold ideas and investing in emerging leaders to building powerful partnerships and using influence beyond traditional grantmaking.

“The IgnitED Awards recognize leaders and partnerships who are pushing the boundaries of what education philanthropy can accomplish,” said Nicole Rodriguez Leach, executive director of Grantmakers for Education. “This year’s honorees understand that lasting change takes more than funding alone. They bring people together, challenge conventional thinking and find new ways to turn ideas and investments into greater opportunities for communities and learners across the entire education continuum.”

2026 IGNITED AWARD WINNERS

Torchbearer Award: Laurie Dien, Vice President and Executive Director for Programs, The Pinkerton Foundation. The Torchbearer Award recognizes leaders whose work makes significant and lasting contributions to more equitable and just education systems. For nearly three decades, Laurie Dien has helped expand opportunities for young people through workforce development and career-connected learning. Her leadership supports initiatives providing mentorship, paid internships and research opportunities to thousands



of learners. Laurie Dien has strengthened organizations, cultivated leaders and helped build lasting pathways to opportunity.

Catalyst Award: Ron Ottinger, Executive Director, STEM Next Opportunity Fund. The Catalyst Award recognizes leaders or organizations that go beyond traditional grantmaking, using expertise, relationships, advocacy and other resources to drive meaningful change. Ron Ottinger is honored for his leadership in expanding access to STEM learning through ambitious initiatives and coalition building. Through efforts such as the Million Girls Moonshot, he helps bring high-quality STEM opportunities to millions of young people while strengthening the partnerships and systems that support their success.

Fusion Award: Fund IRL Coalition. The Fusion Award celebrates collaborations that bring together philanthropy, community organizations and other partners to address challenges and expand opportunities for learners. The Fund IRL Coalition is recognized for bringing together philanthropic leaders, advocates and youth-serving organizations to secure new investments in young people's well-being and development. The coalition builds support nationwide for mental health, youth development and community-based programs.

Beacon Award (Inaugural): Tysha Hardy-Sellers, Program Director, Education and Youth Programs, Lilly Endowment Inc. The inaugural Beacon Award recognizes leaders who identify critical gaps in the learning ecosystem and use investments, relationships, and innovative approaches to inspire lasting change. Tysha Hardy-Sellers is honored for her leadership and commitment to strengthening organizations that serve young people. Through trust-based philanthropy and a deep investment in people and organizations, she expands opportunities for young people while inspiring and supporting leaders across the field.

Kindle Award: Doris Juarez, Project Manager, Postsecondary Education, Strada Education Foundation. The Kindle Award recognizes emerging leaders with five or fewer years in education philanthropy who bring fresh perspectives and innovative approaches. Doris Juarez is recognized for bringing new ideas and a strong commitment to equity to education philanthropy. Through her work in grantmaking strategy, partner engagement and postsecondary success, she helps shape approaches that expand educational opportunities for learners nationwide.

The 2026 honorees were selected for their principled leadership and contributions to education and philanthropy. Together, they demonstrate how funders can help advance meaningful change by investing in people, supporting innovative approaches, building partnerships, and mobilizing resources beyond the grant. The winners were recognized during the [2026 Grantmakers for Education Annual Conference](#) in New York City, where



education funders and partners from across the country gathered to explore this year's theme, *Designing Systems of Abundance and Shared Well-being*.

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Grantmakers for Education is a national network of education philanthropies united by a shared commitment to improving outcomes and expanding opportunities for learners. GFE provides members with opportunities to learn, connect, and collaborate while strengthening the collective impact of education philanthropy.

For media inquiries, contact communications@edfunders.org.

