



REQUEST FOR QUALIFICATIONS

Strengthening State Coalitions for Public Education in New England

Nellie Mae Education Foundation

About Nellie Mae

Nellie Mae is a place-based, regional funder. We give in service to more than 1,500 district communities across six New England states. We believe those communities are best positioned to define what an excellent, rigorous, and relevant education means for them.

Our vision is that every young person in New England has access to educational experiences that affirm who they are, support their healthy development, and prepare them to thrive in school, community, and the careers of the future. Our mission is to champion efforts that support community-rooted solutions and advance excellent, student-centered public education for all New England youth.

Five values guide every decision we make.

Put Youth at the Forefront. Every student deserves an education that meets them where they are and takes into account their family, community, and the realities of their daily life. Every decision the Foundation makes rests on its potential for improving the lives of the young people least well served by current systems.

Build Systems That Support Every Student. We believe that lasting improvement requires understanding the experiences of students and communities and transforming the systems that shape their opportunity. A student's success isn't dictated by the gaps in circumstance they're born into. We work alongside communities to close those gaps so all students can access a high-quality education and thrive.

Build Reciprocal Relationships. Meaningful change demands collective effort and shared problem-solving. We offer our resources and institutional knowledge with humility, and we listen before we lead. We want to engage in authentic partnership, and we are mindful of when to step up and when to step back.

Support Community-Driven Change. We believe communities should be able to drive the change that affects their lives. We work to stay responsive to the priorities others have



identified, and to use our position to share and reduce the risk carried by those seeking change.

Learn, Adapt, and Improve. Meaningful impact requires us to think differently, see differently, and work differently. We draw on research, evaluation, and the perspectives of people closest to the work to make transparent, results-oriented decisions.

About This Opportunity

Much of what shapes a young person's education is decided outside the classroom. State budgets, funding formulas, statutes, and agency guidance set the conditions that districts and schools work within. Those conditions rarely change because one organization asks. They change when organizations that trust each other, acting as a coalition, push in the same direction over time, and when the people working inside the state government have the capacity and the support to act.

For purposes of this opportunity, a “coalition” does not require a formally incorporated entity or a single statewide table. We use the term to include organizations that coordinate or participate meaningfully in sustained, shared work to influence public education policy or practice.

Organizations in all six New England states are eligible to apply. In this phase, we are placing particular emphasis on strengthening work in Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire, where we believe more targeted investment is needed. Each state carries its own history, politics, and conditions, and we do not expect one approach to serve all three. Organizations based in or working in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont, or across state lines will still be considered based on the criteria described in this RFQ. Priority-state status is a factor in funding decisions.

This is an invited process. We are not able to accept applications from organizations we have not invited. We expect to support roughly 30-40 organizations. We are telling you that plainly because we would rather you know the shape of the process than guess at it.

Who We Are Inviting

We are inviting organizations across all six New England states that are part of how their state pushes for change in public education.

Applicants must be able to say yes to all the following.

- Your organization's primary purpose is education policy or practice in New England.
- You are a 501(c)(3), or you have a fiscal sponsor in place.
- You have at least one full-time staff member, or the equivalent in dedicated capacity.
- You work with other organizations toward shared goals, beyond attending meetings a funder convenes.

What We Are Trying to Understand

These are the things we are actually trying to learn from your answers. We are naming them here so you know what we are reading for, and so nothing about this process is a guessing game.

- How you approach influencing education practice and policy that shape young people's experience.
- How your work connects to what changes for young people in educational experiences.
- How you keep young people's experiences centered in your work.
- Your ability to mobilize others.
- Whether you are trusted by your peers and community.
- Whether your work reaches across levels, from communities to districts to the state, and whether any of it travels beyond your state.
- What change you are working toward, and where that work sits right now.
- What role you play in your state that no one else plays.
- How you work with other organizations, especially ones you did not choose to engage with and do not always agree with.
- Whether your organization is on steady enough footing to do what you are describing.
- What else is already happening in your space, and what our funding would add to it.

What We Are Not Assessing

We are not assessing how polished your writing is, whether you have used the same words we use, or whether you have agreed with us in the past. Several organizations have told us directly that they were worried that candor about the Foundation would affect their funding. It will not. We would rather hear what you actually think.

We are also not looking for a longer answer. If your answer is three sentences and it is true, that is a complete answer.

Funding and Timeline

Item	Detail
Award range	Up to \$150,000 per year, for two years.
Grant term	Two years November 2026 to November 2028
Use of funds	Project support
Applications open	September 9, 2026
Office hours and questions	Schedule here
Applications due	September 30, 2026 at 11:59 p.m. EST
Decisions shared	November 24, 2026
Grant period begins	November 24, 2026

What We Ask of Partners

If you are funded, here is what you are agreeing to:

- **Shared learning.** Take part in a small number of convenings with the other funded organizations over the grant period. These are working sessions, not showcases.
- **Standard reporting.** Progress and financial reporting on the schedule in your grant agreement.
- **Documentation of learning.** We may ask you to talk with a researcher, or to help document what the group is learning as the work goes on.

What We Hope to Learn

We are trying to answer some questions of our own through this work, and we would rather say what they are than pretend we already know the answers.

- What holds a coalition together over time, especially between organizations that do not always agree, and what does a funder do that helps or gets in the way?
- What does it take for what communities know to reach the people who can act on it, and what actually happens when it does?



- Each state carries its own history, politics, and conditions. What travels between states, and what does not?

You are not expected to answer these in your application. We will come back to them with you over the course of the grant.

How We Will Review

Applications are read by Nellie Mae program staff using a written scoring guide. That guide is built around the items listed above. Reviewers meet to compare their reading before any decisions are made.

How to Apply

Complete the accompanying application document and submit it, along with your attachments, by September 30, 2026 at 11:59 p.m. EST through the Nellie Mae Online Grantee Portal, which opens on September 22, 2026).

Attachments: your IRS determination letter or fiscal sponsor agreement, your current organizational operating budget, and your most recent audited financials or Form 990.

Accompanying materials: application document and scoring rubric.

Questions

We are here to help. If something in this document is unclear, or you are not sure how to answer a question, please contact Colin Jones (cjones@nmefoundation.org). We hold regular office hours and will share answers to common questions, so everyone sees the same information.