AMATEUR RADIO DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Grants Evaluation Team Findings
May 2026

Executive Summary

In 2026, the Grants Evaluation Team (GET) reviewed the results from 49 ARDC funded grant projects. These volunteers aimed to identify trends, assess whether projects were successful and a good use of funds, evaluate the impact of recent process changes, and determine what insights should be shared with the broader community. Rather than conducting a formal evaluation, the GET provided an informal peer review focused on practical lessons and highlighting overall outcomes.

Observations

- Results remain positive and consistent with last year. 79% of projects were rated successful and considered a good use of funds. No projects were deemed complete failures, and nearly all delivered meaningful outputs, learning opportunities, or advanced the amateur radio and digital communications fields.
- Five projects had outcomes that were unclear at the time of evaluation. For the second year in a row, research and development (R&D) projects did not have any unknown outcomes, indicating that our new processes for working with R&D grantees to get results are working well.
- Longer-term results from museums and emergency communications projects are very positive, showing that these projects have an impact many years after implementation. As may be expected, R&D longer term outcomes were more mixed, but a majority have lasting results.
- Projects providing clear documentation, broad reach, and outreach beyond the amateur radio community generated some of the greatest value. Straightforward projects like classroom activities or equipment upgrades for clubs continue to be excellent avenues to help individuals learn, experiment, and do.

Recommendations

- ARDC will continue to make process improvements to better serve our community. In particular:
    - Creating a task force to proactively recruit high-impact R&D projects in target areas and continue to define our R&D goals.
    - Looking into long term outcomes for repeater projects to understand how these projects impact a group over time.
    - Sharing outcomes and learnings of our grants, including links to the results of R&D grants, in our grant descriptions on our website.

Overview

In 2026, the Grants Evaluation Team (GET) is composed of 11 experienced ARDC volunteers, including former applicants, staff, and members of the public. Since Q3 of 2025, they reviewed 49 final reports submitted between June 2025 and February 2026 from ARDC grant-funded projects.

Each final report was reviewed by a subset of the volunteers and then discussed with the group to identify trends and learnings. When information was missing on higher-profile projects, more information was requested. Like prior years, the goal was not to perform a formalized evaluation; instead, the aim was to reflect on the work done from a variety of perspectives and provide the community with an opportunity to identify takeaways.

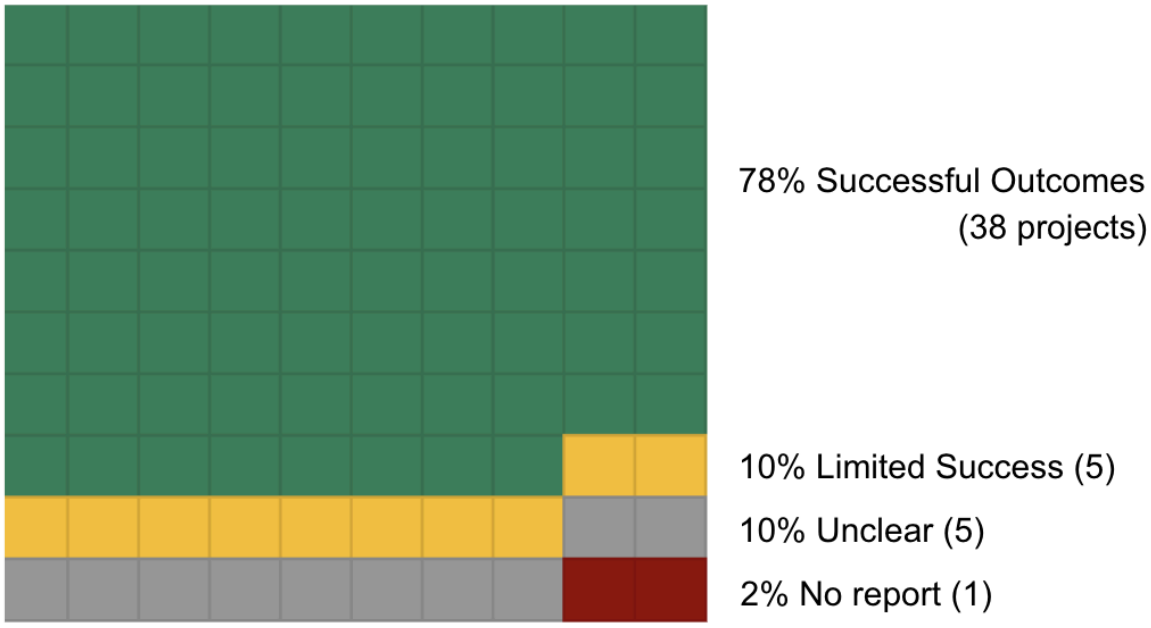
The aim of this informal evaluation was to answer these questions;

- Were these grant projects successful?
- Were they a good use of funds?
- Are the process changes we're implementing having an impact?
- What information should we be sharing back with our community?

Ultimately, the GET found that compared to last year, a similar proportion of projects had unclear outcomes (10% this year, 9% last year) and a similar number saw only limited success (10% this year, 7% last year). A similar proportion of grant funded projects were successful and a good use of funds (79%). We continue to see evidence that the process changes we've implemented may be having a positive impact - R&D projects no longer have unknown outcomes; we're able to more quickly capture and publish results so they are preserved for the future; and grantees who are unable to complete their work voluntarily choose to return funds instead of having them go to waste or be directed towards inappropriate uses.

A major goal from last year was to update the public with the results of our grant funded projects by adding them to our website with relevant links and resources. Midway through the year, staff realized that, at the rate we were publishing updates, we would not get caught up on the backlog of information we had to share out in a timely manner. To remedy this problem, we formed the Grants Communications Team (GCT), a group of volunteers who act as scientific communicators by writing up results that are accessible to nontechnical audiences and technical experts.

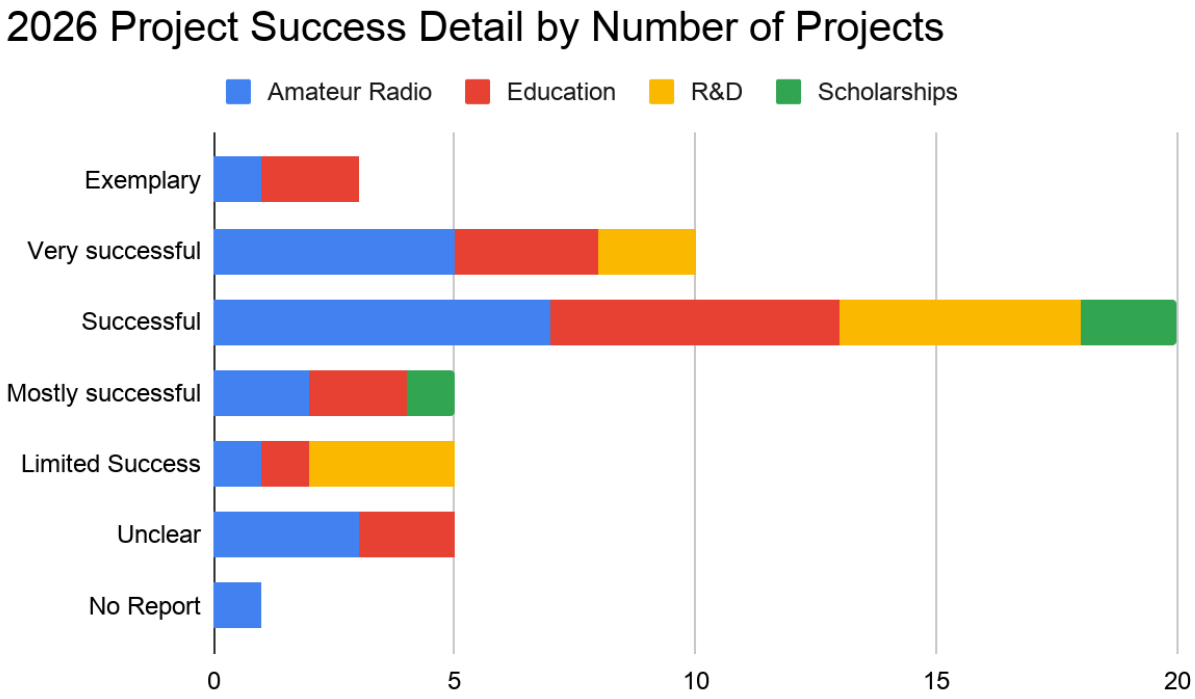
2026 Completed Project Success Rate



The chart above reflects the success rating of projects from groups that submitted their final reports between June 2025 and February 2026. The GET evaluated the final reports and scored their outcomes ranging them from being not successful to strongly successful. A majority - 78% of projects - had a clear amount of success toward reaching their goals and ARDC's goals. In the below chart, the portion of successful projects is broken down by degree of success.

The GET assessed each individual project and final report across two metrics - was the project successful and was it a good use of funds? Both of these metrics were rated from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

The answers to these two questions were averaged and turned into the information in the chart below. Projects that received perfect scores of "strongly agree" were categorized as "exemplary." Projects that were controversial or who got a majority of "weakly agree" ratings were categorized as having "limited success." These labels are slightly different from those used in prior years to be more specific and enhance clarity. 49 total projects are represented.



We found no evidence of any project that had absolutely no or very little success or learnings. Each project that reported back to us was able to accomplish something, even if it fell short of what it had hoped to achieve.

What makes for a good project?

Exemplary Projects

These projects receive perfect scores and high levels of enthusiasm from our volunteers. This year, the bar was raised even higher as reviewers tended to score more critically. Three projects stood out:

- Brick Store Museum is a small museum that sees 150 visitors at its new, ARDC-funded radio room every month. The radio room is staffed by volunteers, was a low cost effort, and is well advertised online. Reviewers were impressed that the exhibit is staffed and not stagnant, and that visitors to the actual space are tracked instead of being lumped in with the large number of visitors to the museum in general.

- Haiti International Friendship Amateur Radio Club overcame extraordinary circumstances to help people with critical communications needs.

- Teachers in Space, Inc. offered a stand-out train-the-trainer program. While not in the category of "low-budget," these kinds of educational engagements are a wonderful opportunity to act as multipliers - educating teachers (and educating young people) is at the core of ARDCs mission. Improving the teaching of STEM with deliverables that the teachers can use immediately in class is an important use of ARDC funds.

Very Successful Projects

A majority of this year's funded projects fell into the "very successful" or "successful" category. These projects didn't always meet all of their goals or stick exactly to their originally outlined plan, but when they pivoted they did so in ways that clearly benefited the work. Very successful projects stood out among their "successful" counterparts by having some element that went above and beyond that others could learn from.

- Trailers tend to be expensive and risky for groups to maintain in the long term. However, the ROI was excellent for one trailer project from Louisiana Delta Radio Club that has already been used at 50 events over two years by their particularly active group.

- Particularly high-quality amateur radio courses aligned their syllabus with the interests of schools and their educational standards, leading to doubled benefit for students and teachers.

- Projects that produced good quality documentation, lessons learned, or tutorials for others stood out as particularly valuable whether the grant was for a ground station or a licensing class.

- Frugality was valued by reviewers whenever a grantee was able to maximize the impact of grant dollars. Low cost per participant created the impression that the program would be easier for the grantee to sustain after the end of ARDC funding. In some cases, like with a project to buy AV equipment to enable an amateur radio club to more easily give presentations, the project was low cost, straightforward, and a catalyst for better engagement.

- On the other hand, in several cases inexpensive wasn't always better. For example, CubeSat projects tend to have a higher average cost per student than licensing classes, but the students engage in research and educational activities with transformative depth.

- R&D projects that had a significant open source release of technology, particularly innovative or creative technical solutions, and credible claims of interest on the part of others to use it scored particularly highly.

Successful Projects

By and large, projects that were rated as “successful” did what they said they would do. They put up repeaters, offered education, got people licensed for amateur radio, issued scholarships, published research, and other work. One thing that stood out - any time a project was able to get out into the broader world and outside the insulated sphere of ham radio, it was seen as particularly favorable.

Two things to note on these projects - one is the consistent incredible volunteerism shown by grantees. The sum of these projects were successful because of thousands of hours and hundreds of volunteers across the world. This is a unique aspect of the amateur radio and digital communications communities that ARDC continues to celebrate.

The second thing to note is that while a lot of these projects are simple and the outcomes occurred as promised, the impacts are revitalized clubs, youth finding the first spark of interest in tinkering and building things, and people connecting over new ideas. Evidence of all of these items is abundant in their final reports.

Mostly Successful Projects

These projects were able to meet a majority, but not all of their main objectives. Five projects fell into this category.

- Some projects that proposed to install an antenna did not end up getting the required approvals to be able to follow through and had to pivot to other activities.
- Some groups did a number of educational activities with youth, but were unable to do all of the activities that were originally proposed. Instead they focused on alternative activities.
- An education project that carried out the work as outlined in their grant to set up a high school station, but the final report was submitted before the station equipment had been used to engage students. In this case, it was too early to tell if the results would end up being a good use of funds.

Limited Success Projects

These projects accomplished something worthwhile, but fell short in a key way.

- R&D projects that met some of their objectives but were unable to achieve a significant portion of other objectives fell into this category. So did R&D projects with a potential for impact on users but who did not yet show an active user community.

- A project that was negatively impacted when US federal funding was cut, leading it to have partial success.

- A notable proportion of the projects that saw limited success were originally submitted in 2022. It could be that projects that struggle tend to take longer to be completed. Additionally, projects that are late on submitting final reports are less likely to still have evidence of their work publicly available, reducing how well they score in evaluation.

No Success Projects

The GET continued to see that there were zero projects that had absolutely zero or very minimal success. For example, creating a course or exhibit with no evidence of attendees, failing to use equipment for any kind of activities and instead letting it sit unused, evidence of fraud or other serious issues, or funds being redirected toward something totally different from the original proposal that falls outside of our mission.

When a team starts to see that a project is unlikely or unable to achieve its goals, ARDC staff guide them to return funds with the understanding that they can try again for a different project in the future. This most commonly happens when something happens to a lead project team member - illness, new jobs, and other life interruptions can result in a project lead choosing to cancel a project.

Unclear Projects

Five projects had at least one GET volunteer mark the outcomes as unclear.

- Some of these projects were repeater networking efforts that left volunteers wondering if the new repeater was getting usage. As a result, the GET plans to look more into long-term usage of repeater projects to get more insight into these kinds of projects. This is discussed more in the recommendations section below.

- A couple of projects did not yet have final results and had submitted their final reports before outcomes could be fully understood.

Final reports that were never submitted

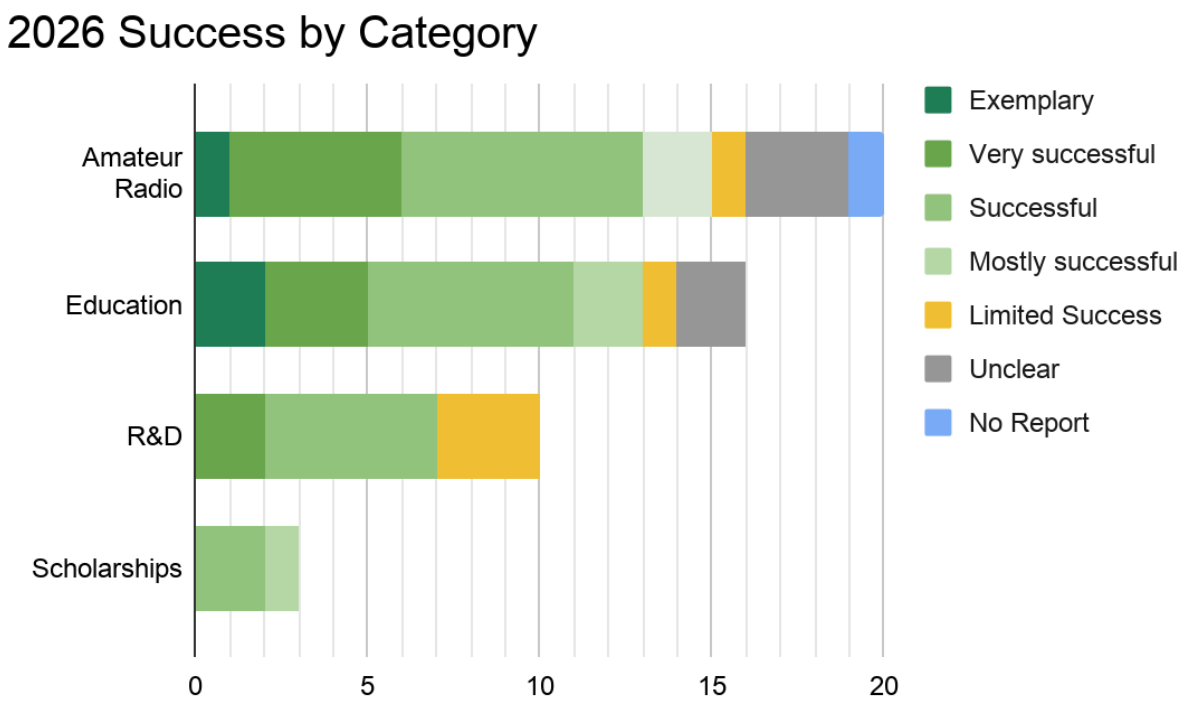
As of March 3, 2026, the all-time number of projects that never submitted a final report is 9 out of 375. That is about 2% of the projects that we fund. In 2025, we had one project that failed to submit a final report.

Projects that never submit a final report are notified that they are ineligible for future funding.

The number of projects submitted changes frequently - it is not unheard of for projects to submit a final report up to a year past the due date with no communication to ARDC beforehand. This may be due to reluctance on the part of the project contact to admit that they are significantly behind schedule.

No actions are suggested to further decrease this number since it is already low.

Success by Category



The above chart shows project success by the number of projects, broken down by category.

Amateur Radio

These projects are at the heart of what we do, and they continue to deliver a high volume of positive results.

Repeaters
“What benefits accrued or will accrue from expanded coverage of this repeater network?” is a question that arose again and again. Similar to our treatment of emergency communications projects, the GET suggests a 3- or 5-year follow up survey that asks if the system is being used for common activities. While this would not give a crisp accounting of the number of users, it could provide a good indication of whether these systems stay active over time. Additionally, asking grantees to describe any planned community activities that will use the system and prompting them to think about usage as a metric at the beginning of their project may help them share this information more proactively.

As ARDC funding has become more competitive, repeater projects may need to offer more than a routine repair or upgrade. Projects that stood out served areas with no commercial coverage, met a demonstrated emergency communications need, or offered education or a program of activities in conjunction.

Education

The highest-performing education projects share a clear formula: provide everything a participant needs (class, exam, radio, training), partner with an established venue like a library or museum, have a plan for what happens after the grant ends, and report concrete numbers — new licensees, attendance counts, recurring participants. The weaker education projects tend to have ambitious reach goals but minimal evidence of actual engagement. Museum-based projects consistently score well because foot traffic provides a built-in audience. Engineering senior design projects also offered a good return on investment since these provide an in-depth opportunity for students for relatively low dollars.

What counts as an “expensive” educational project?

Reviewers differed greatly on their gut reactions to if a given education project was high cost or not. For example, is $400 per student a high cost? In order to decide, GET volunteers had to weigh the type of programming, regional prices, and many other factors. To help calibrate reactions and make this assessment more consistent, staff should provide research on average costs for different kinds of educational projects at different types of institutions in different countries. The aim of this would not be to provide a measuring stick, but to instead be able to better spot when something seems like an extreme outlier that should spark follow up questions.

R&D

Many R&D projects list out a large number of ambitious goals and only achieve a proportion of them. More than other projects, these tend to have limited success because they fail in their objectives but have learnings from the process. However, given that the nature of R&D is more risky than other types of projects, this difference should be expected.

There is no “right” answer when it comes to the level of acceptable risk or how often R&D projects achieve their goals. The acceptable level of risk and project failure is, in part, based on the potential payoff of the project. Projects with the potential to have major positive impacts are often worth attempting even if their chances of success are lower. This year’s R&D projects were scored higher than last year, and the GET is of the opinion that the overall success rate of these projects is currently acceptable, with the tradeoff of offering strong contributions to the amateur radio and digital communications fields.

CubeSats
The Kyushu Institute of Technology Democratization of Space project stood out as a model for outreach, involving many institutions and countries. The Payload and ground station competition was a novel idea that greatly increased outreach and might be a model for other R&D/educational projects.

Discoverability of results
The best R&D projects have easy-to-find documentation and tutorials that accompany results. Papers are a good outcome, but a website that makes the paper discoverable and usable is a much better outcome. For many R&D projects, the initial results look promising, but GET volunteers are left asking; “Do you have users? Do you have a way for people to learn about this?”

Accessibility as the Key to Effective R&D
Tutorials and work that makes it easier for users to get started with technology we care about had particularly strong impact. Our lower-scoring R&D projects tend to fall short because of a lack of approachability, whereas the few that focused their efforts in this area scored highly. The worst R&D outcomes happen when the project produces something that exists only within the team, with no easily findable public documentation and no clear path to adoption.

Scholarships

In general, ARDC-funded scholarship organizations do an excellent job of issuing scholarships as promised and supporting students through additional support. For some of our community members, this is the work they think has the most meaningful impact, while others think that scholarships are not tied as closely to our mission as other kinds of projects. These projects are also currently very US-centric with the exception of the Society for Women Engineers (SWE). More in-depth discussion is included under “suggestions for process improvements.”

Successful Projects vs. A Good Use of Funds

GET volunteers are asked to rate projects along two dimensions - if they think the project is successful, and if they think it is a good use of funds. In most cases, those things align, but when they don't, we are able to capture some major aspects of how projects are perceived. This year, scores tended to diverge more than they did last year on these two dimensions.

This year, projects that scored highly for being successful but lower on a good use of funds included:

- One project received emergency funding that filled in for unexpected NSF funding cuts. Volunteers all agreed that the work performed by the project was of exceptional quality and contributed meaningful research to the field. At the same time, they scored use of funds lower since it was disappointing that this was work previously supported by the NSF and normally would not require ARDC funding. In this case, the lower score is a reflection of the project's circumstances, not the project itself. Other than these circumstances the project was seen as being a good use of funds.
- Had a high cost per participant compared to other similar projects.
- Not publishing outcomes in an-easy-to use or findable way, limiting broader impact.

One of the GET's takeaways this year is that there's future benefit in examining how efficiently funds were used in the latest round of grants. 10 projects had the characteristics above or other similar notes, and the focus on this shows that the GET this year zeroed in on how efficiently funds were being used and outcomes were being shared. The goal of this was not to criticize individual grantee choices, but instead to benchmark if there were suggestions for how grantees or ARDC could optimize how funds are used. In general, these scores were not overly critical - for example, a project would get a "strongly agree" for meeting goals and "agree" for use of funds when it had a slightly higher than average cost per participant or licensing costs.

On the other hand, projects that scored low for success but still were a good use of funds tended to not meet all of their goals but serve a clear, positive purpose. Only two projects fell into this category.

Recommendations for Process Improvement

The GET provided recommendations and requests for clarification to the other volunteer committees, staff, and the ARDC Board. A number of these changes and questions have been answered already, with the resulting actions listed below.

Scholarships
The GET asked the ARDC Board for clarification on more clearly defining why we want to support scholarship programs. Identifying our goals will allow us to assess if these specific programs are meeting those goals.

In response to this, the Board put together the following guiding principles and goals:

Principles:

- ARDC supports scholarships as a way to build a pipeline of future innovators and contributors to the amateur radio and digital communications fields.

- ARDC supports broadening access for people who otherwise would not have access to contribute to the amateur radio and digital communications fields. This means people with financial need and those from underrepresented backgrounds who face barriers to participation.

- ARDC would like to support more scholarships in the Global South and would like scholarships to have more of a global reach.

Research and Development
This category of funding is very broad, and our current definition of digital communications is broad as well. For the first several years of our funding, our approach was to start broadly to get an idea of what kind of demand there was for funding support and what ideas may exist that are not on our radar. Now that we have more information on the kinds of projects that are routinely proposed, we can target gaps that have the potential to be transformative for the communities we serve.

The GET recommended that the Board provide additional clarification around our goals for R&D to help assess in more detail how well we are meeting those goals. Due to this and other strategic work around R&D projects, in 2026 the Board and staff will be putting increased attention on identifying high-impact granting targets. This new task force will provide additional focus to address this funding category in 2027.

Patents and Licensing
Two projects that the GET reviewed ran into issues with patents. The GET suggests adding a note in the instructions for R&D projects to consider any potential patent or license issues

before beginning their project. This isn't something that we need every applicant to address in their proposal, but the reminder may be helpful for groups in the planning stage.

A couple of times grantees have asked for legal or patenting guidance. While ARDC cannot provide legal guidance to grantees, it is appropriate for grantees to include funding in their initial grant application to get their own legal advice. This is especially applicable to R&D projects that face open questions about patents and licensing. Any legal advice obtained with ARDC funds would need to be made open access and available like any other work we fund, meaning that the advice has the potential to be used by others as well.

CubeSats are Primarily Educational

Currently, some CubeSats self-select to be classified as R&D, while others self-select to be classified as educational projects depending on the focus of their goals. ARDC will now classify CubeSats as educational projects and select them primarily based on the potential educational value. Technical innovation will still be an important part of the review process, but not the primary driver. Most CubeSat projects fail in their R&D objectives, so selecting and evaluating them based on their educational contributions may be more responsive to ARDC's mission and objectives.

In general, the cost per student for CubeSats tends to be high. As education projects, focusing on how efficiently CubeSat projects use funding to engage students in a very high quality fashion or how they engage larger numbers of students may be one of the best ways to compare these proposals to each other.

Antenna Permissions

Frequently, groups were unable to complete antenna projects because they did not have permission to install the antenna from their facilities, as either they did not have required permits, or they did not realize that expensive structural engineering reviews would be required. In these cases, funds were usually returned or used to complete other amateur radio work. As much as possible, staff will pre-screen for these potential issues and request that permissions be obtained in advance. In some cases, this isn't possible. When that is the case, grantees should have a back up plan for what they would like to do if they can't install the antenna as planned. It may also be appropriate for ARDC to fund planning grants as a first phase for this kind of work, with the understanding that if an engineering review comes back and approves a project, then ARDC will support the antenna installation.

This feedback is similar to last year when it focused on both antennas and site permissions. There has been a decrease in projects with problems with repeater site permission issues. Staff and GAC have ramped up screening for repeater site permission issues in particular, which may have led to this decrease.

Tower Safety

Given that antenna and tower climbing is a big concern in amateur radio, the GET would like to see ARDC encourage the use of safety best practices. This will take the form of a reminder on our instructions page for applicants to include funds for safety equipment. The GET did not see any instances of unsafe practices in the reports they reviewed, but given that this is a hot topic in the industry it is in alignment with ARDC's values to encourage best practices.

Cost Benchmarking
It would be helpful for staff to look into providing the GAC and GET with background information on typical costs for education projects to help both the GAC and GET understand if a project really is "expensive" or not. In particular, looking into what industry data can be found for museum programming, camps, various kinds of college STEM programs, and STEM classroom activities could be useful, as well as looking at costs in past grants. The purpose of this would not be to give preference to the lowest cost projects but instead to be able to more accurately spot outliers.

In some cases, it may yield helpful information for applicants - for example, applicants will sometimes include testing fees in their proposal. These applicants may not be aware that LaurelVEC and other free testing options are available. There are also a number of low cost online testing options available. By providing solutions that have worked for others, we may be able to support programs in using funds more efficiently and being more sustainable in the long run. As always, we would refrain from micromanaging applicant budgets and instead would provide information and resources while deferring to applicant expertise on their needs and local circumstances.

Improving Long-Term R&D Discoverability
When looking for long-term R&D results, it was extremely difficult to find information. Starting in 2025, the GET collects updated links and documentation for projects that are then publicized by ARDC on our website. Copies of sites are made using the Wayback Machine, and papers are downloaded and shared locally. The bulk of this work is being performed in 2026. Our hope is that this will better preserve the results of these projects and make it easier for the general public to find.

Repeaters
"What benefits accrued or will accrue from expanded coverage of this repeater network?" is a question that arose again and again. Similar to our treatment of emergency communications projects, the GET suggests sending out a 3 or 5 year follow up survey that asks if the system is being used for common activities. This will provide insight around the value and longevity of these systems.

Outputs vs. Outcomes
A weak spot in our informal evaluation process remains looking at outputs instead of outcomes, which is to be expected given how difficult it can be for individual groups to assess outcomes. How many newly licensed hams (output) end up getting on the air (outcome)? Will the

innovative new software ARDC funds (output) end up becoming popular and useful for users (outcome)? Does equipping a college radio shack lead to more people choosing to participate or work in radio related disciplines? Does having a club table at community events get new people involved in the hobby? Answering these questions is out of reach for most groups due to their complexity, a lack of experience with evaluating programs, or a lack of capacity for long term or more in depth tracking.

An action item identified last year was to have the GET and ARDC staff work to create a recommended list of metrics to help applicants brainstorm how they can track if their tactics are effective. In the summer of 2026, the GET will focus on the project of producing this guidance. We do not expect that all grantees will be able to implement these tactics, but providing ideas may help groups more accurately assess for themselves if their work is achieving what they had hoped.

Sustainability
ARDC will add a question to the final report form asking if the grantee has any plans to continue the program or work in the future. This may help us establish trends with sustainability and give us insight into if certain types of projects struggle beyond ARDC funding or if things like classes tend to happen year after year. In addition, the GET can continue to lead in periodic 3-5 year surveys of past grantees.

At the same time, each year, ARDC has added new questions to the final report form. Special care should be taken to track changes in how much time grantees are spending on the final report. The GET taking time to re-examine if there are any questions we can scale back or simplify at the end of each year is appropriate. If at any point we stop using information from any particular question, it will be cut.

Longer-Term Results

Last year, the GET proposed to look into the longer term results from three types of projects that had closed from 2020 to 2025 - museums, emergency services, and R&D projects.

Museum Projects

Challenge: Projects that put displays about amateur radio or digital communications into museums send in their final reports when the exhibit opens. While historical data on visitation to a museum can show likely future impact, reaching out to museums one year after a project is funded to see if the exhibit is still in place and used for any field trips or other activities can provide better information.

2025 Proposed Solution: The GET proposed that ARDC reach out to past-funded museums to see if their exhibits are still in place. This could start as a one-time check to establish a greater sense of certainty around these kinds of projects. For example, if 90%+ of exhibits are still in

place one year later, it is reasonable to assume going forward that historical, one-year visitation numbers are a reliable indicator of exposure.

2026 Results: Staff looked at the 9 completed museum projects that ARDC had funded and did a quick online search to see if the exhibits or stations were still present in the museums. All 9 were still active, easy to find, and many continue to prominently feature ARDC on their website. 5 out of the 9 projects were awarded grants 5+ years ago, emphasizing the staying power of these kinds of projects.

Emergency Communications Projects

Challenge: The full impact of projects that seek to improve emergency communications infrastructure can't be known at the end of a grant when the infrastructure has been put in place. Instead, the real impact comes later in the form of training and education for people using the system, and utilization of the system during emergencies.

2025 Proposed Solution: The GET proposed that ARDC send out a brief survey to projects that have been in operation for a couple of years to ask if it was used in an emergency and if training and readiness is still ongoing. Stories of impact where equipment was used in an emergency would be useful for promoting amateur radio as a service, and would be good evidence to continue to fund this kind of project.

2026 Results: The GET and ARDC staff designed and sent out a survey to every project mentioning emergency communications that had been closed for at least a year in the summer of 2025. We got back 24 responses out of 53 projects (45% response rate).

- 8 groups are using equipment weekly
- 3 are using it about every two weeks
- 4 are using it monthly or bimonthly
- 4 are using it quarterly or twice a year
- 2 were unable to answer the question due to moving or the project not yet being completed
- 2 answered in an ambiguous way ("regularly" / "numerous times")
- 1 had stopped using the equipment

There is no way to know if the groups that did not respond are still impacted by their grant.

9 groups have used the equipment in actual, specific emergency situations, including fires, floods, hurricanes, tornados, and snowstorms. Every group except one used equipment for more than emergency services and drills - they included contesting, community outreach, ragchews, and classes.

The one groupstopped using the equipment because of lack of interest from individuals to continue using it. The lack of interest was driven by the fact that the items were no longer compatible with local emergency services and had become obsolete. They noted that they had used the equipment frequently for two years before stopping.

We asked former grantees if they had any feedback or advice for ARDC regarding emergency communications:

- Multiple people mentioned that “Our biggest challenge is maintaining relationships with the emergency management community.”

- Several people mentioned to us that the grant had been transformative: “The ARDC’s support has been instrumental not only in expanding our technical capabilities but also in strengthening and growing our clubs. The ARDC grant has empowered us to play a vital role in both emergency preparedness and public education, while inspiring the next generation of amateur radio operators.” Some also encouraged us to continue supporting projects that aren’t emergency communications: “while support of gov't-affiliated agencies is good, they're very often "users"/"consumers" and nothing more -- they often don't otherwise contribute back to Amateur Radio's other goals. I feel that it's important that groups like mine strive to keep experimentation (ham for ham's sake) and development -- and outreach, both in the ham community and the public -- alive in these projects, and not get bored and allow them to stagnate after completing a check-list item for ourselves or served agencies.”

It was encouraging to see that, at minimum, 43% of the grants we’ve funded continue to have an effect as much as 5 years later. The GET sees this as good evidence that continuing the course of supporting emergency communications projects has a significant impact on our goals of getting amateur radio operators learning and doing. An additional bonus is the broader impact of helping communities with disaster preparedness.

Research and Development Projects

Challenge: For R&D projects in particular, it could be many years before the discoveries made by the project are used by others. This makes it hard to determine the value of a funded research project.

2025 Proposed solution: Not all research is expected to be used in the long run, but checking periodically to see if any ends up having exceptional impact is likely worthwhile. Checking for how many times ARDC-funded papers are cited several years down the road can be a way to show impact on the field. Software tools exist that could allow ARDC staff or volunteers to quickly check a list of papers to see if they have been cited. Additionally, projects with information on GitHub and GitLab can be checked for activity to see if there is a community still

involved with a project. The GET proposes generating a list of these projects and checking them once every two or three years.

2026 Results: The GET formed a subcommittee to search for everything they could on 12 of our past funded R&D projects. Volunteers looked for continued GitHub activity, website updates, research paper citations, and general online information.

The first thing that stood out to volunteers was that it was often extremely difficult to find information. Websites had been taken down, links were broken, and simple searches returned either nothing or information from when the project had initially started or closed out. With some difficulty, volunteers were able to find the following papers still accessible online:

- Oesterreichischer Versuchssenderverband - Dachverband (Austrian Radio Amateur Society) for Wireless Regional Area Network in Sub-GHz Bands as Last Mile for HAMNET had produced a masters thesis that was presented at IEEE that had gotten 20 downloads in 2025.

- Purdue's "Network Analytics Tools for Understanding Wireless Systems" had also produced an IEEE paper and information on Github that was still available.

- Portland State University's Foundation Full-Duplex Wireless Antenna Design for Amateur Bands has a paper and website up that has zero citations on Google Scholar, but it was posted in 2025 so no citations would be expected.

- Websites were active for Rhizomatica (two projects), M17, MMDVM, and Reproducible Builds.

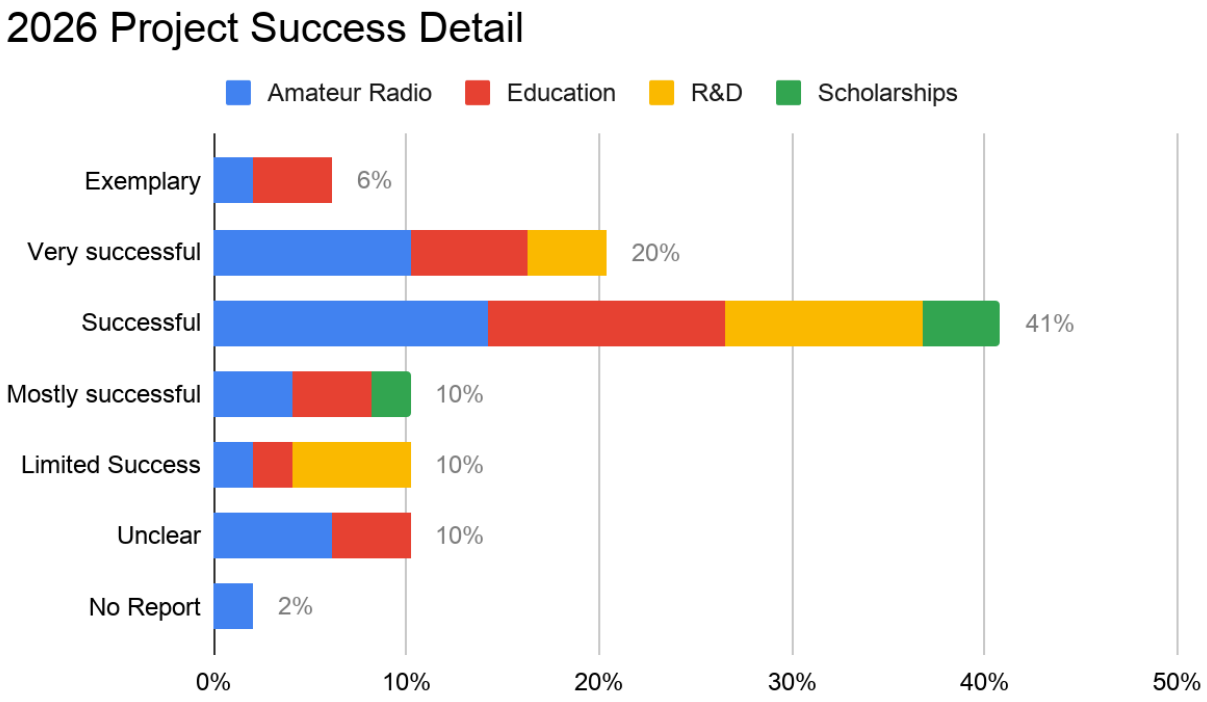
Information on other projects was unavailable, out of date, or paywalled with no accessible alternative.

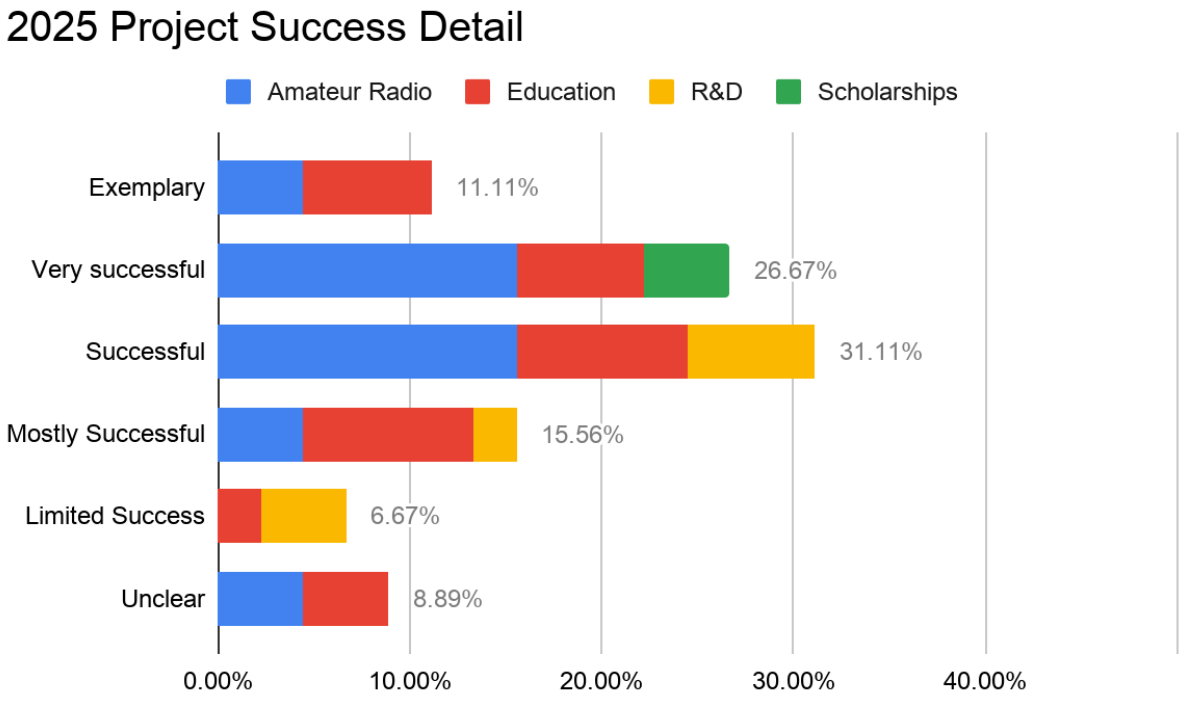
In all, 66% of the projects had some remaining helpful artifact or evidence of continued activity, while 33% did not. Given how difficult it was to find a large portion of the information, the GET feels that these results can and will be improved in the next few years.

The first way they will be improved will be because of our changing requirements. Many of these projects were funded early on in ARDC's granting. ARDC's application and reporting requirements are now more stringent, with a focus on outcomes, a longer term R&D project roadmap, and usability of results. Our hope is that when looking again into longer term results in a couple of years, the GET will find that the projects we select now do a better job of publicizing and sustaining results.

The second way they will be improved, as mentioned above, is through ARDC saving, sharing, and tagging copies of results on our website, making them much more discoverable.

Comparison to prior year





2025 and 2026 both represent a significant decrease in unknown outcomes compared to 2024.

In 2026, we saw fewer projects get “exemplary” ratings. After discussion, the GET suggests that this should be interpreted as a difference in how harshly volunteers score projects, and not a reflection that project quality decreased. While the line between whether a project is or isn’t successful tends to be clear, whether or not a project deserves to be considered truly excellent or just very good is more subjective and subject to individual style.

2026 had more high-scoring R&D projects than 2025. This could be due to the small sample size, or due to the interventions ARDC has put into place to be more selective with R&D and provide R&D projects with more guidance and assistance. It is interesting to note that while scoring became harsher for amateur radio and education projects, these new R&D projects still received higher scores. This supports the idea that R&D project results may be improving.

2026 is the first year where the GET has chosen to include how many projects at the time have an outstanding report as a part of this percentage breakdown.

Ranking	**2024 Number**	**2024 %**	**2025 Number**	**2025 %**	**2026 Number**	**2026 %**
Exemplary	8	8.1%	5	11.1%	3	6.3%
Very Successful	23	23.2%	12	26.7%	10	20.8%
Successful	24	24.2%	14	31.1%	20	41.7%
Mostly Successful	16	16.2%	7	15.6%	5	10.4%
Limited Success	6	6.1%	3	6.7%	5	10.4%
Unclear	22	22.2%	4	8.9%	5	10.4%
No Report					1	2.0%

Follow up from the 2025 GET Findings

In 2025, the GET had suggested that staff take a number of actions to improve the granting process.

- [In-progress, aiming for completion in 2027.] ARDC should add tagging to online grant descriptions to make these more searchable and usable for future applicants and those hoping to use the results of grantee work.

- [DONE] Look at the most recent suggestions for ARDC that are in the final reports and incorporate any needed tweaks to make sure no areas are confusing.

- [DONE] Clarify in the final report instructions that we'd like to know if there were any unexpected outcomes.

- [To be completed in 2026] Sharing examples of metrics that applicants could consider tracking may be helpful for planning for their project and eventually writing their final report.

- [DONE] Ask in the final report for grantees to share if they plan to continue the work. In the case where equipment is used for multiple rounds of a class or for multiple years in a row, it makes the value of the project much higher.

Conclusion

In all, we are pleased that with the changes implemented a couple of years ago, the quality of information that we get about how these projects go remains high and results remain overwhelmingly positive.

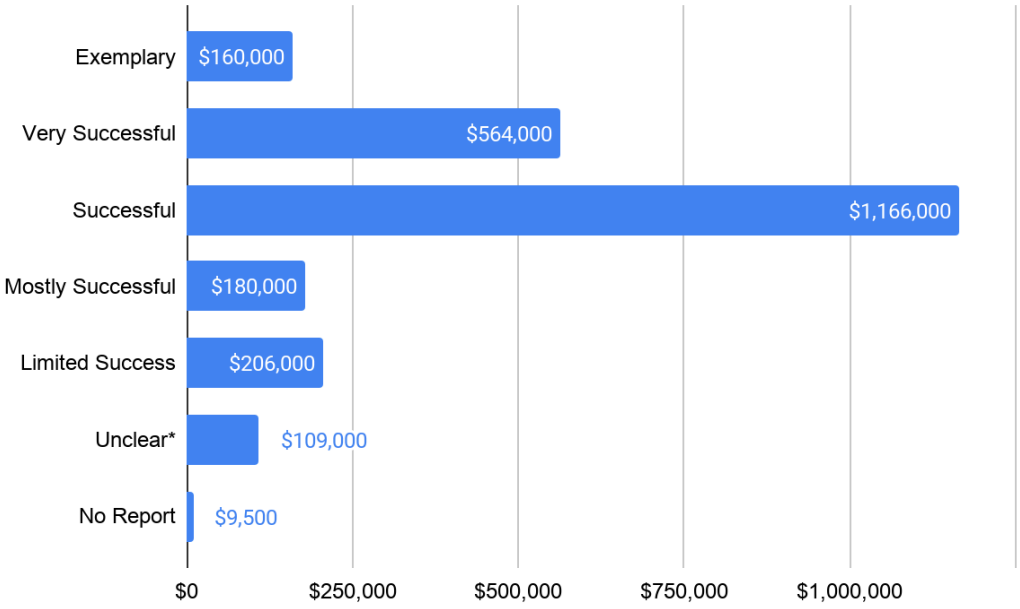
The amateur radio and digital communications communities do an exceptionally good job of following through on what they said they would do. The fact that grantees have such a high rate of reporting back on their results and of voluntarily choosing to return funds if they run into insurmountable obstacles speaks to the fact that transparency and accountability are a part of our community's ethos.

Appendix A: List of GET Members

This year's volunteers looked through dozens of photos, updates, and reports from grantees eager to share how their work has effectively impacted their communities. It is only with the help of this team that we are able to distill 100's of pages of information down to a few big-picture take-aways. Thank you to our hardworking volunteers.

- **Chair:** Falcon Momot – *AF7MH*
- Willi Kraml – *OE1WKL*
- Scott Czeck – *KC1GHT*
- Darryl Smith – *VK2TDS*
- Lad Nagurney – *WA3EEC*
- Don Prosnitz – *N6PRZ*
- Wayne Heinen – *N0POH*
- Jim Idelson – *K1IR*
- Tithira Jayasekera – *4S6TKA*

Appendix B: 2026 GET Scores & Success Rating By Dollars



Scoring	Dollars
Exemplary	$160,000
Very Successful	$564,000
Successful	$1,166,000
Mostly Successful	$180,000
Limited Success	$206,000
Unclear*	$109,000
No Report	$9,500
Total	$2,385,000

Numbers are rounded and approximate due to variations in currency conversion values.

**Omitted from this is the ARRL Club Grants report. This was an early report on the close of the project, and was labeled as unclear because we do not yet have results from the various projects the ARRL funded. ARDC will get an update on this program when their full project results are available. With the ARRL Club Grants program included, the unclear number totals $701,000 and the total amount of dollars reviewed is $2,977,264. It has been omitted because it appears as a misleading outlier.*