

2022 // CASE STUDY

All Together Now: How the Launch of Teacher Teams Spurred Honest Reflection, Difficult Conversations, and District-Wide Growth

INTRODUCTION

It all started with a question. [Gloucester Public Schools](#) kindergarten teacher Jaclyn Baldassano loved her job, her district and her students, but was feeling under-nourished as a professional and wanted to find a way to keep learning.

She met with the district's assistant superintendent, and planned to ask to attend a webinar or half day training. What she got instead was a chance to join a newly formed regional network, and an opportunity to jumpstart a movement that changed how the Gloucester Public Schools approaches equity district-wide.

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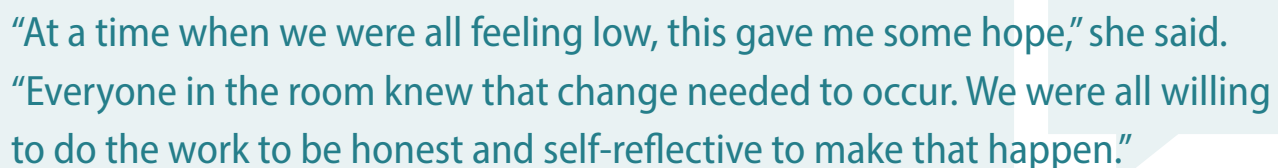
Baldassano joined the inaugural cohort of the [Essex County Learning Community \(ECLC\)](#), a new network for North Shore school districts created to offer a space for shared learning, building connections, addressing common challenges, and celebrating and elevating stories of success.

As part of the experience, in 2019 she and four other Gloucester teachers were grouped into topical “teams” and spent five months discussing topics related to equity that felt important, authentic, and more meaningful than she had anticipated.

They admitted truths about their own racial and cultural identities, and walked away with a renewed sense of clarity and awareness around personal biases, experience with inequities, and anti-racist practice. Participants were paired with peers from neighboring schools and districts and engaged in discussions framed around readings and personal narratives. The pandemic and summer of social unrest that followed the murder of George Floyd was still nearly a year off, but participants already knew that the conversations they were having were relevant, timely and important, Baldassano said.

“At a time when we were all feeling low, this gave me some hope,” she said. “Everyone in the room knew that change needed to occur. We were all willing to do the work to be honest and self-reflective to make that happen.”

This dynamic of educators working with educators from nearby communities has become foundational to the vision of the ECLC. Funded by the [Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation](#) in 2018, the ECLC has since expanded to include more than 15 districts from across the region. The network aims to create a nurturing, cross-district community of practice to spur high quality learning and reflection in order to create cultures of belonging for both students and adults in schools.

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That commitment to honesty around issues related to equity was immediately evident to the Gloucester educators, and provided a stark contrast to what they were hearing and experiencing in their schools. Equity was not a topic they often discussed in Gloucester, and needed to be prioritized, said Peggy Brown, a reading teacher at Veterans Memorial Elementary School.

“This was the first time that I saw people comfortable talking to one another about things related to race, equity and gender,” Brown said. “We need to be talking about equity in the schools in our district, and we weren’t. I realized that if not me, who is going to do it?”

Gloucester is a small fishing community along the coast of northern Massachusetts, with an enrollment of just 2,833 students at their seven K-12 schools and preschool. According to 2020-21 data, approximately 79 percent of the student body is white, as compared to 56.5 percent of students statewide.¹ During the same year the district’s teaching staff was predominantly white: Of the 491 full-time teachers, just 4 identified as Hispanic, 2 as Black, and 1 as Asian. This reflects a statewide equity concern: across Massachusetts 87 percent of full-time educators are white, in contrast to just 56.5 percent of students.

Research shows that all students - particularly students of color - benefit from having at least one teacher of color.² But teacher shortages, escalating retirements, and a diminishing pipeline nationwide have made it even harder to retain, recruit, or elevate high-quality, diverse candidates.³ Building an equity and inclusion mindset among all of the adults in the building is an important step in the right direction, said former ECLC group facilitator Dawn Shearer Coren.

Peer to peer discussion groups on complex, often uncomfortable topics like equity succeed best when participants walk in willing to share, learn, and be vulnerable with one another, Coren added.

“These conversations are for people who are ready and open to new ideas,” she said. “It takes time and courage to push into what bias looks like, where the ideas come from, and how we can work together to change the narrative. You have to be ready to do the work.”

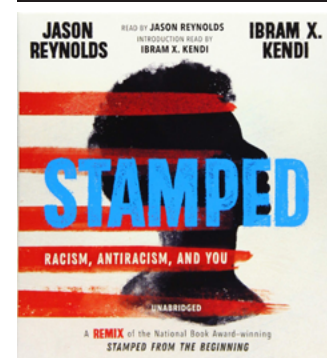
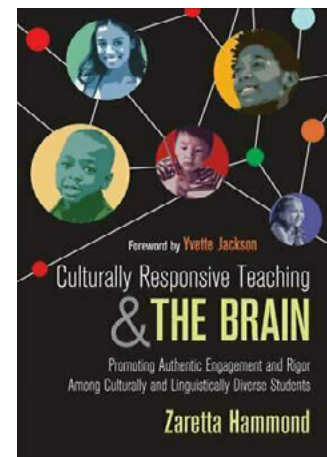
When the first series of topical team meetings concluded, the Gloucester teachers were hungry for more, and asked for ideas for how they could keep the conversation going back home. Coren suggested forming a book group, and urged them to read [Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students](#), by Zaretta Hammond to jumpstart further discussion and reflection. Hammond is a former classroom teacher whose research and writing is focused on linking instruction, equity, and literacy - precisely the topics the Gloucester team wanted to bring back home. The five teachers returned to Assistant Superintendent Gregg Bach to request permission to run a book study that summer. Bach not only agreed, he asked if he could join them.

That initial book study led to a series in the district facilitated by the same group of educators for their peers on Hammond’s book, and on [Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You](#) by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds. The book discusses the construct of race and the history of racist ideas in America as a platform to inspire hope for an anti-racist future.

1 Source: [DESE District Profile](#)

2 Source: [Teachers of Color: In High Demand and Short Supply, Learning Policy Institute](#)

3 Source: [Understanding the National Shortage of Teachers of Color, EdTrust](#)




These book studies were held throughout the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, and prompted the launch of district-wide affinity groups, a shared Google page of learning resources, and ongoing discussion between educators at all levels.

Today, new teacher induction in Gloucester includes a full day on culturally responsive teaching, and first year educators participate in their own book study on Hammond's book. Moreover, the high school's entire instructional strategy is built around the core concept of "Ignite, Chunk, Chew and Review," the four phases of culturally responsive lessons outlined in Hammond's text.

"This was the first time that I saw our teachers say "OK, now I get it. Now I see how awareness of culture relates to equity, and how it all relates to high achievement," Bach said. "We do a lot of scrambling to try the latest new thing in education. But when someone articulates a lot of things from research that we know and puts [it] together in a compelling message, that's what we want to go with."

The stress of the pandemic has slowed the original cohort of Gloucester teachers from leading additional book studies during the 2021-22 school year, but the educators are continuing in their own professional learning, and participate in ECLC's ongoing anti-racism and equity experiences. Baldassano is pursuing training in [RULER](#), a systemic approach to social and emotional learning (SEL) focused on the five skills of emotional intelligence (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating) developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Brown is leading a professional learning community focused on equity, and through ECLC's new [Teacher Action Research Fellowship](#) she is also exploring the intersection of trauma sensitive learning and high academic expectations.

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These educators are determined to reignite the district-wide professional learning next year, Brown said, to ensure the conversation about equity continues in Gloucester at the district, classroom, and individual levels. They have made a long-term, lifelong commitment to this work.

"I have a lot to learn, and I have already learned so much," Brown said. "We learn best alongside each other so we can feel comfortable talking about these things, and then go share it with others."

About us

The Essex County Learning Community (ECLC) provides K-12 educators in Essex County with authentic, community-driven professional learning/development experiences: we focus on building relationships with educators, serving students with diverse learning needs, and on achieving equitable student outcomes. The ECLC is a dynamic community of practice that aims to lift up and scale evidence-based district, school, and classroom-level strategies, while empowering educators to better serve their students with diverse learning assets and needs. This includes students with learning disabilities, learning and attention issues, exposure to trauma, and those not served well under current systems because of structural inequities based on race, culture, income, language, and gender.

OUR MISSION & VISION

The Essex County Learning Community (ECLC) is a network of educators challenging bias and disrupting inequitable systems to drive sustainable change in public schools.

Within a nurturing, cross-district community of practice, educators continuously develop the mindsets, strategies and tools they need to create cultures of belonging in schools—for both students and adults.

RESOURCES & ECLC PARTNERS

[Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain, by Zaretta Hammond](#)

[Stamped, by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds](#)

[Debbie Irving: Racial Justice Educator & Writer](#)

[National SEED Project](#)

[American & Moore: Diversity Education, Research & Consulting](#)

READY FOR RIGOR WORKSHEET

READY FOR RIGOR

A Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching

