
Essex County Learning Community *Cohort 1 Final Evaluation Report*

Andresse St. Rose

Managing Director

Research, Evaluation and Policy

Michael Berardino

Senior Research Associate

Research, Evaluation and Policy



Center for Collaborative Education
Transforming schools for student success



Essex County
LEARNING COMMUNITY

table of contents

03

introduction

34

changes in district practice

15

what we found

41

a learning community approach

27

changes in educator practice

49

recommendations



introduction

overview of the section

The need, vision, and purpose of the Essex County Learning Community.



introduction

About ECLC

In May 2018, with funding from the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation, the Essex County Learning Community (ECLC) was launched and a first cohort of school districts was invited to participate in an intensive two-year professional development experience. Initially incubated at New Profit, ECLC is now directed by Full Frame Communications, in partnership with the Center for Collaborative Education.

The goal of ECLC is to use a community of practitioners to lift up and scale systemic approaches that enable schools to better serve students with diverse learning assets and needs. For Phase I of the project, almost 100 educators from six participating districts engaged in cross-district professional development from May through December 2018 and created district plans to address identified challenges and opportunities. Phase II of the project, which ran from January 2019 through March 2020, focused on districts' implementation of plans with continued collaboration and deeper and more targeted professional development.



introduction

About ECLC

The first cohort consists of six Essex County public school districts (Beverly, Danvers, Gloucester, Haverhill, Rockport, and Swampscott). A second cohort of five school districts joined in January 2020 (Andover, Essex North Shore Agricultural and Technical School (ENSATS), Hamilton-Wenham, Manchester-Essex, and Saugus). **This evaluation focuses solely on the Phase 2 experience of Cohort 1.**



“[ECLC] really helped us to plant seeds and get a deeper understanding of wrong concepts that we might not have had time to do ourselves. So [we] were able to use our grant from the Tower Foundation in a really effective way for our school district to help us think more deeply around these areas that we were already struggling with and they kind of organized it for us and that was really helpful. . . I feel like I moved faster on some of the things than I would have normally and in my normal school year because of the support, the help, and professional development they gave us. I am really glad we applied.”

Focus group participant



introduction

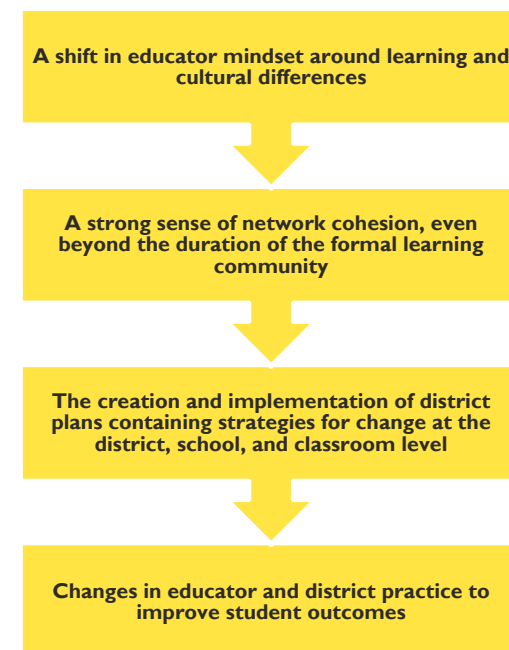
Evaluation questions

The following questions guided the evaluation of Phase II of the Essex County Learning Community:

- ❑ How and to what extent have educator mindsets and practice changed as a result of participating in the ECLC?
- ❑ What changes have occurred at the district-level, and what, if any, barriers do districts face in making changes/implementing district plans?
- ❑ How and to what extent has the learning community approach facilitated learning and other network outcomes?
- ❑ What is the level of satisfaction among participants with the ECLC learning experience?

To answer these questions, the research and evaluation team at the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) administered a pre/post-survey to assess participants mindsets and practices at three points (the beginning of Phase I in June 2018, at the end of Phase I in December 2018 and in January 2020 at the end of Cohort I); gathered participant feedback through exit surveys after all ECLC events to assess participants' learning, satisfaction, and questions; and invited district representatives to participate in two focus groups in January 2020.

The ECLC experience was designed to achieve the following outcomes:



introduction

Why we need ECLC

The participating districts serve increasingly diverse student populations, including a large population of students with high-needs. Districts face challenges in meeting the needs of these diverse learners.

The six participating Cohort 1 districts enroll just over 22,000 students— the majority of whom are White (70%) with a substantial Latinx (21%) population, as well as a smaller share of African American/Black (4%) and Asian (2%) students. About 3% of students fall into other race/ethnicity categories.

More than one-fifth (21%) of students have a diagnosed disability (SWDs), one in twenty are English Learners (ELs) (6%), and a third are economically disadvantaged (33%). Almost half of all students (48%) are designated as “high needs” the percentage of students that are SWDs, ELs, and/or economically disadvantaged. ¹



introduction

Why we need ECLC

The current system does not work for all students.

Overall, students with disabilities, English Learners, and economically disadvantaged students face more learning challenges than their peers; and Black and Latinx students often have worse outcomes than White and Asian students.

For instance, across the Cohort I districts the chronic absenteeism rate for Black and Latinx students (24%) is almost twice that of White students (13%), the rate for ELs (23%) is seven point higher than the rate for non-ELs (16%), and the rate for SWDs (23%) is nine points higher than the rate for non-SWDs (14%).

Following similar trends, the 4-year graduation rate is 88% across all six districts, but there are large disparities by race/ethnicity, EL and SWD status (see sidebar); and there are also substantial disparities between student groups on the state assessment (see chart on next page), making it clear that the current system does not work for all students.

Cohort I district 4-year high school graduation rate (2019)

88% all students

91% White students

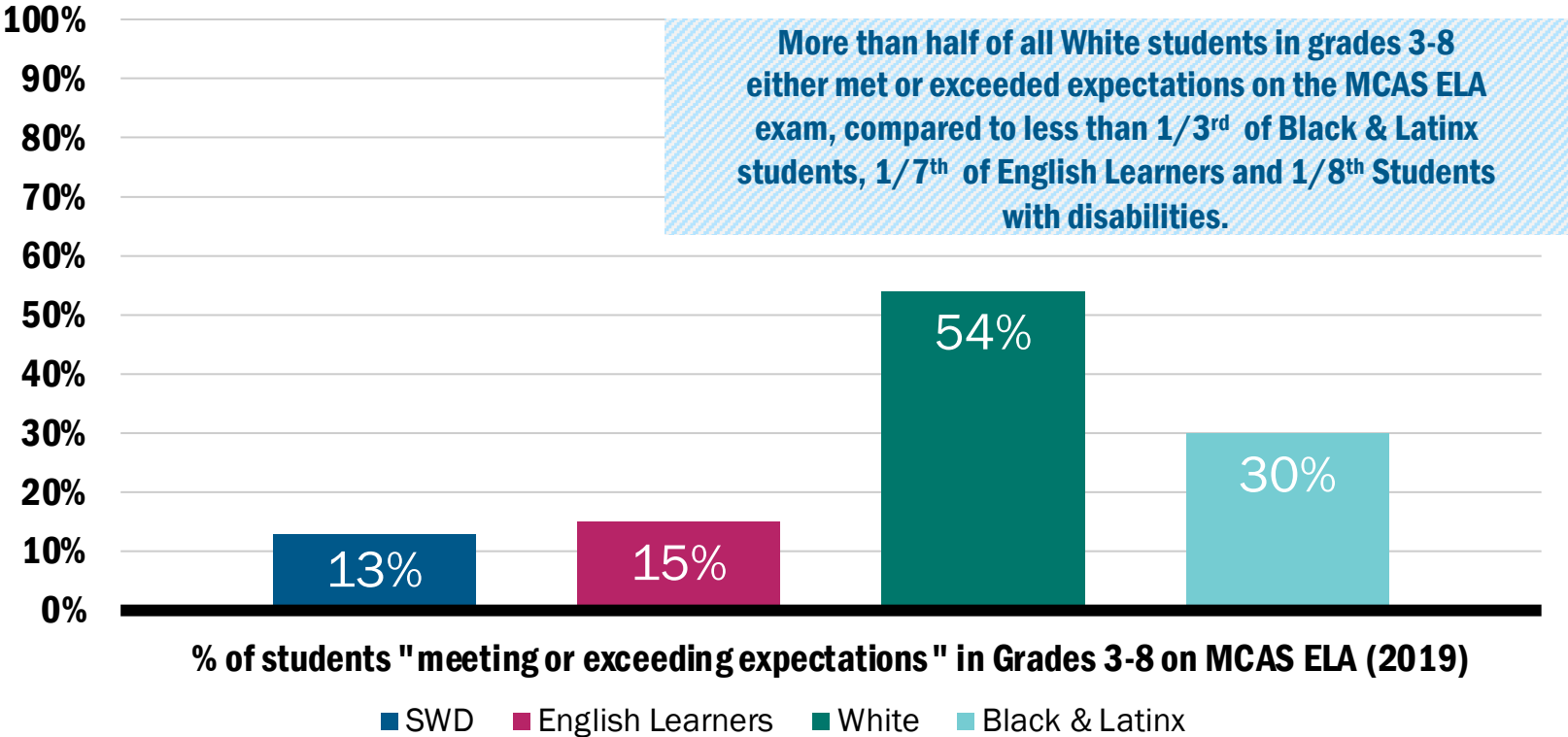
72% Black & Latinx students

73% Students with disabilities

66% English Learners



2019 MCAS performance



introduction

Why we need ECLC

Additionally, ECLC educators report difficulty in serving three particular student groups:

Students who “resist conforming to traditional school culture or instructional approaches” (37% of respondents)

Students with a first language other than English (34%)

Students who “may have gaps in their foundational knowledge/perform below grade level” (24%)

The biggest challenges districts face in meeting the needs of students include:

1. Closing achievement gaps
2. Creating safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments
3. Shifting mindsets of stakeholders to believe that all students can learn
4. Supporting educators in addressing these challenges through effective practices



introduction

Why we need ECLC

Educators identified several challenges they face in working with certain student groups, chief among them was a lack of time.

When prompted to provide more detail about any student group they indicated some difficulty working with, respondents cited lack of time, including lack of collaborative time with other teachers and specialists, lack of planning time, and inadequate time to work with the students themselves.

Additional challenges included:

- Limited resources such as materials, language support (translation services etc.)
- Limited training for staff to develop complex instructional approaches
- Communicating with students and getting to know their cultures
- Limited access to trained staff (e.g. Sheltered English Immersion)

These were some of the challenges and dilemmas that educators addressed in the learning community and in creating their district plans. To support diverse students or students with learning differences, teachers/educators need an understanding of individual difference and diverse cultures and community to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards.

“I feel that the challenges in educating ELLs and students who don't conform to traditional school culture is time, especially collaborative time. Teachers need time to plan for these students and the amount of planning time is not sufficient. We need to allow general education teachers time to collaborate with ESL and special educators in order to plan access to lessons/curriculum.”

Cohort I participant on pre-survey



introduction

Why we need ECLC

Our theory of change is that when adult educators are growing and learning, their students benefit greatly.

Though not necessarily intended as such at the outset, the ECLC has evolved into a full-fledged adult development experience in which participants grow--personally and professionally--in connection to one another. Our theory of change is that when adult educators are growing and learning students benefit greatly--a connection supported by research. Historically, teaching (and learning) has been a private affair, with every teacher sinking or swimming alone in a closed-door classroom. We believe that when teaching and learning are de-privatized, when collaboration and deep professional learning are the norm, educators reclaim the joy that drew them to the field and build skills that will energize them and relationships that will sustain them over the course of their career.



It is difficult to differentiate instruction to meet all the needs of students. In a given day, I may teach six different classes, requiring six different preps -- this gives me one period to complete all my paperwork for special education, update grades, provide feedback on student writing, touch base with colleagues about a student, collaborate with a co-teacher, make photocopies, send parent e-mail etc... I put in much effort to provide rigorous lessons that meet students at their level of learning. **I am being pulled in too many directions.**

Teacher Topical Group participant



what we found

overview of section

This section briefly summarizes key findings from the Phase I evaluation and details the findings from the Phase II evaluation.



The hardest part of learning something new is not embracing new ideas but **letting go of old ones.**

Todd Rose

Author of *The End of Average*

Director of the Mind, Brain, & Education Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education



what we found

Why educator mindsets

Mindsets² are the “basic assumptions, beliefs, core values, goals, and expectations shared by a group of people who are committed to a specific field, and what they use as rules to guide their attitudes and practice in that field.”

As identified in the definition, belief is a major component of mindset – what we believe the nature of situations should be determines or influences our expectations and goals. For example, educators’ beliefs about what schools should achieve determines the face of school systems, such as the design of schools’ key characteristics and their major functions. Therefore, creating change in education means identifying, connecting and changing beliefs and mindsets if/as needed.

Guided by this understanding and the assumption, informed by research, that mindsets can be changed with training and that changing mindsets is often a precursor to changes in educator practice, we assessed the following educator mindsets among ECLC participants using a pre/post survey:

- **Growth vs. Fixed mindset**
- **Inclusion vs. Separation models for educating students with mild to moderate disabilities**
- **Colorblindness vs. Awareness of student race, ethnicity and disability status**
- **Deficit vs. Asset-based thinking with respect to student culture, language, and ethnic background**
- **Equality vs. Equity mindset with respect to student opportunities and outcomes**



²Definition of mindsets taken from Fang, Kang and Lui, (2004), Measuring Mindset Change in the Systemic Transformation of Education. The pre/post survey was informed by the Framework of educator mindsets and consequences by Filback & Green (2013).

what we found

Overview of Phase I evaluation

From the start of the initiative, Cohort I participants reported having an overall growth mindset and openness to reflection, which are important for the objectives and outcomes of the learning community.

At the start of the ECLC, participants indicated an overall growth mindset and openness to reflection, which are important for the objectives and outcomes of the learning community. A growth mindset indicates that participants are willing to challenge their beliefs, try new things, and grow. This approach to learning often extends into the classroom, as educators promote a growth mindset with their students. Having participants who are open to reflecting on their practice is important for teachers' professional development and practice as the ability to reflect on practice is a basis for learning.



By the end of Phase I, participants reported more positive mindsets about diverse learners. For example, over the 6-month period, participants reported an increase in asset-based thinking, support for inclusion models and practices, and related changes in practice—especially at the classroom level.

Particularly positive is the shift from a deficit to an asset-based mindset. A deficit-based perspective is an attitude that looks at students particularly students with disabilities, students of color, and English Learners, as problems to be solved leading to lowered expectations of students. In contrast, educators with an asset-based mindset believe that students with different abilities and from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds can learn and bring strengths to schools; learn about, recognize and acknowledge disconnects between school and students' home cultures; and engage and challenge students by tapping into their unique strengths and traits. This is especially noteworthy because U.S. public schools have, for more than a century, operated primarily from a deficit perspective.

what we found

Phase II findings: Changes in mindset

ECLC promotes an asset-based mindset.

At the end of Phase II, participants reported a stronger asset-based mindset than they did at the start of the initiative. At the end of Phase II:

- 87% “strongly agreed” that “all students bring strengths to school” (+16 percentage points from beginning of initiative)
- 63% “strongly agreed” that “I set and have high expectations for all my students” (+16 percentage points from beginning of initiative)
- 13% “strongly agreed” that “I am able to draw on my students’ cultural and language assets” (+6 percentage points from beginning of initiative)

However, despite the overall asset-based mindset, at the end of Cohort I, almost two-thirds of participants (63%) agreed to some extent that they struggle to “provide linguistically-diverse students with content” and about a third (36%) agreed that they struggle to some extent “to integrate students’ backgrounds in my lessons especially those who come from cultural backgrounds different from mine”. However, almost all (97%) reported that they “actively seek to get to know my students, including acknowledging their cultural background.”

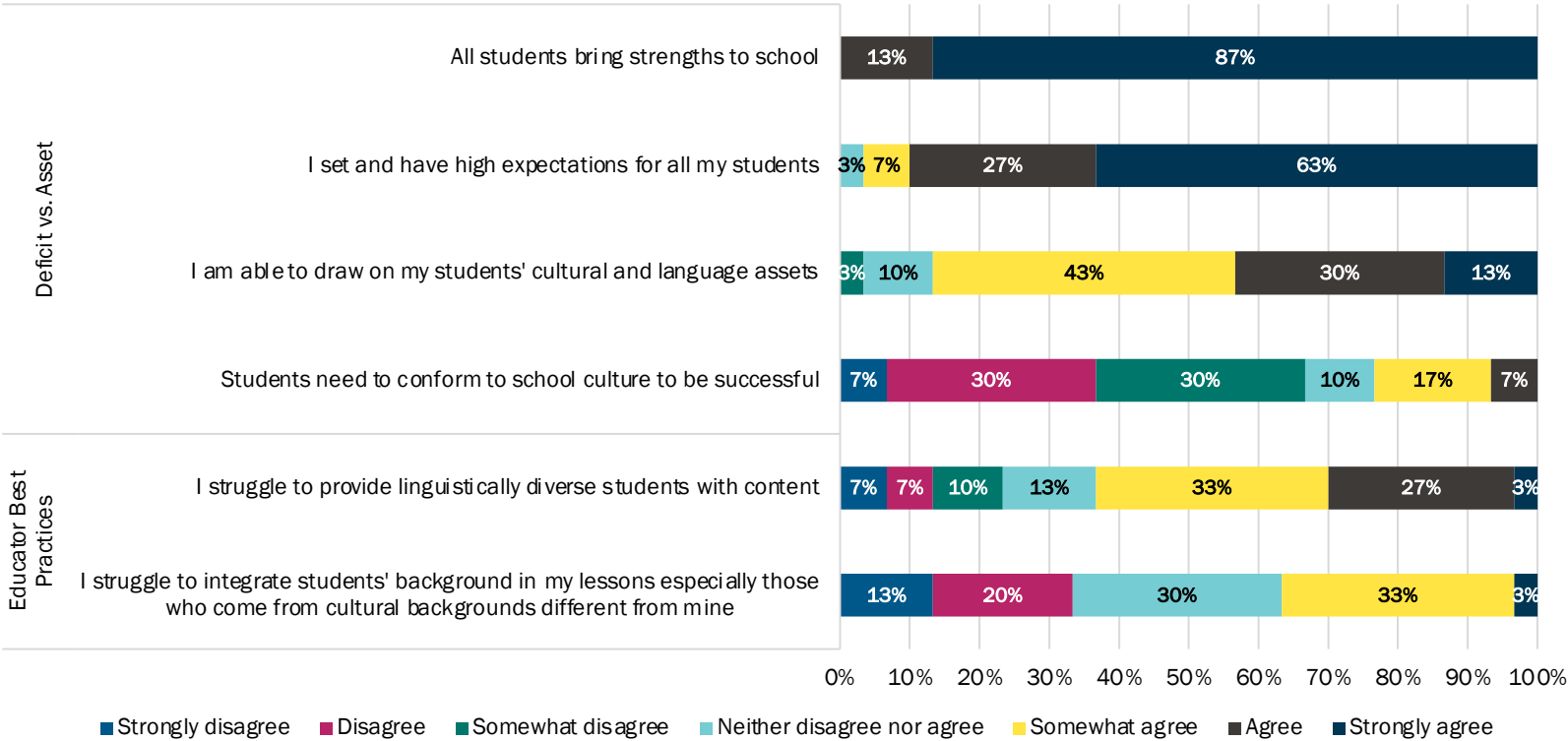
“[This experience] made me think of other cultural groups not as “accountability inconveniences” but as “asset-rich resources”. In this era of high-stakes testing, we all feel so much pressure to improve test scores that I am sometimes guilty of the former.”

Cultural Competency Topical
Team member



educator mindsets: asset-based vs. deficit mindset*

Distribution of post-survey responses



*n= 92 on pre-survey and n=53 on Dec 2018 post-survey and n=27 January 2020 postsurvey

what we found

Phase II findings: Changes in mindset

Some of the most consistent changes, on average, were around educator mindset on the practice of inclusion.

There is a substantial research base supporting the benefits of inclusion, the practice of educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms, for students with special needs. The practice is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the federal requirement to disaggregate student performance data (see ESEA/NCLB or ESSA) has arguably led schools to increase access to general education for students with special needs. However, successful inclusion of students depends not only on policy or mandates but educators' and administrators' beliefs and practice.

During Phase I, some of the most consistent changes in educator mindsets, on average, were around the practice of inclusion with educators reporting more positive perceptions of students with disabilities and the efficacy of inclusion overall.

By the end of Phase II, mindsets on the practice of inclusion remained much the same with incremental improvement on some indicators. For example, similar to the pre-survey:

- 9 out of 10 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that “students with mild to moderate disabilities should be educated in general education classrooms to the fullest extent possible”.

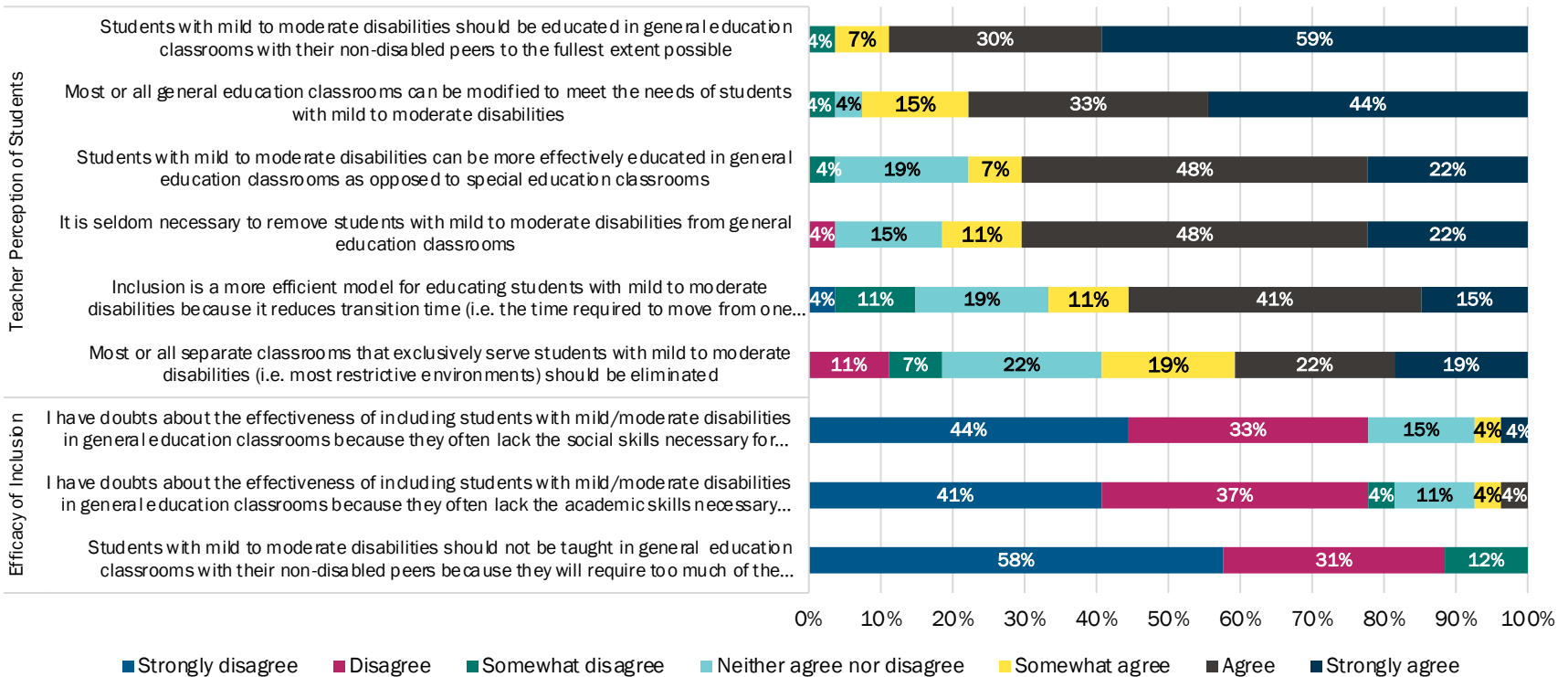
Additionally, with respect to the practice of educating students with mild to moderate disabilities separately from their peers,

- 60% agreed to some extent that “most or all restrictive environments should be eliminated” (+5 percentage points from beginning of the initiative), while
- 18% disagreed to some extent that “most or all restrictive environments should be eliminated” (-12 percentage points from beginning of the initiative).



educator mindsets: teacher perception of students with disabilities and efficacy of inclusion

Distribution of post-survey responses



what we found

Phase II findings: Changes in mindset

Most Cohort I participants endorsed both an equity and equality mindset.

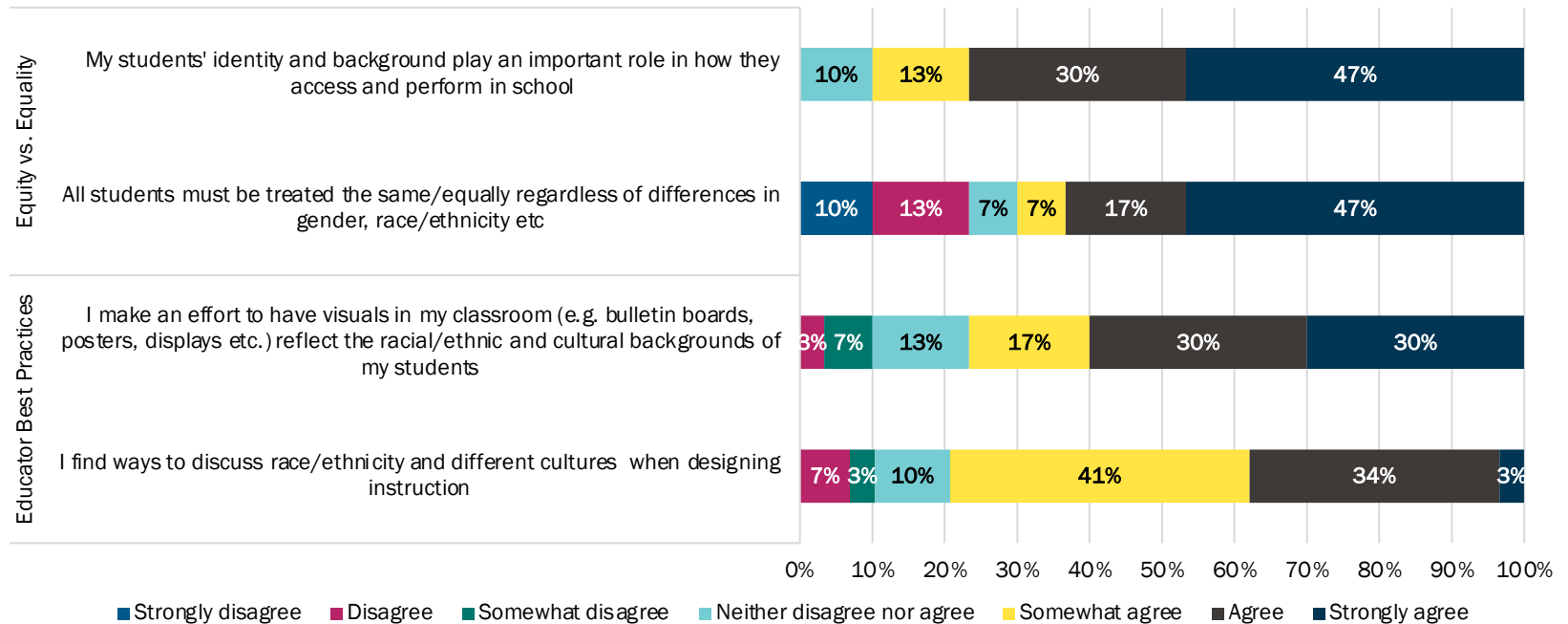
Similar to the findings from Phase I, we see a confusion or conflation of the concepts of equity and equality among participants at the end of Cohort I. Although these two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably –they are different. Educators with an equality mindset typically endorse the idea that all students be treated the same. They believe in meritocracy or that achievement is based solely or mostly on student ability or effort and ignore how larger, often systemic, issues affect student access, opportunities and outcomes. In contrast educators with an equity mindset, understand that multiple factors, including systemic factors, affect how students access and perform in school—disadvantaging some and privileging others; and believe in providing each student with what they need to be successful. Most ECLC participants endorsed both mindsets:

- 77% either agreed or strongly agreed that my students' identity and background play an important role in how they access and perform in school; and
- 64% either agreed or strongly agreed that all students must be treated the same/equally regardless of differences in gender, race/ethnicity, ability, culture, language etc.



educator mindsets: equity vs. equality

Distribution of post-survey responses



*n= 92 on pre-survey and n=27 on post-survey

what we found

Phase II findings: Changes in mindset

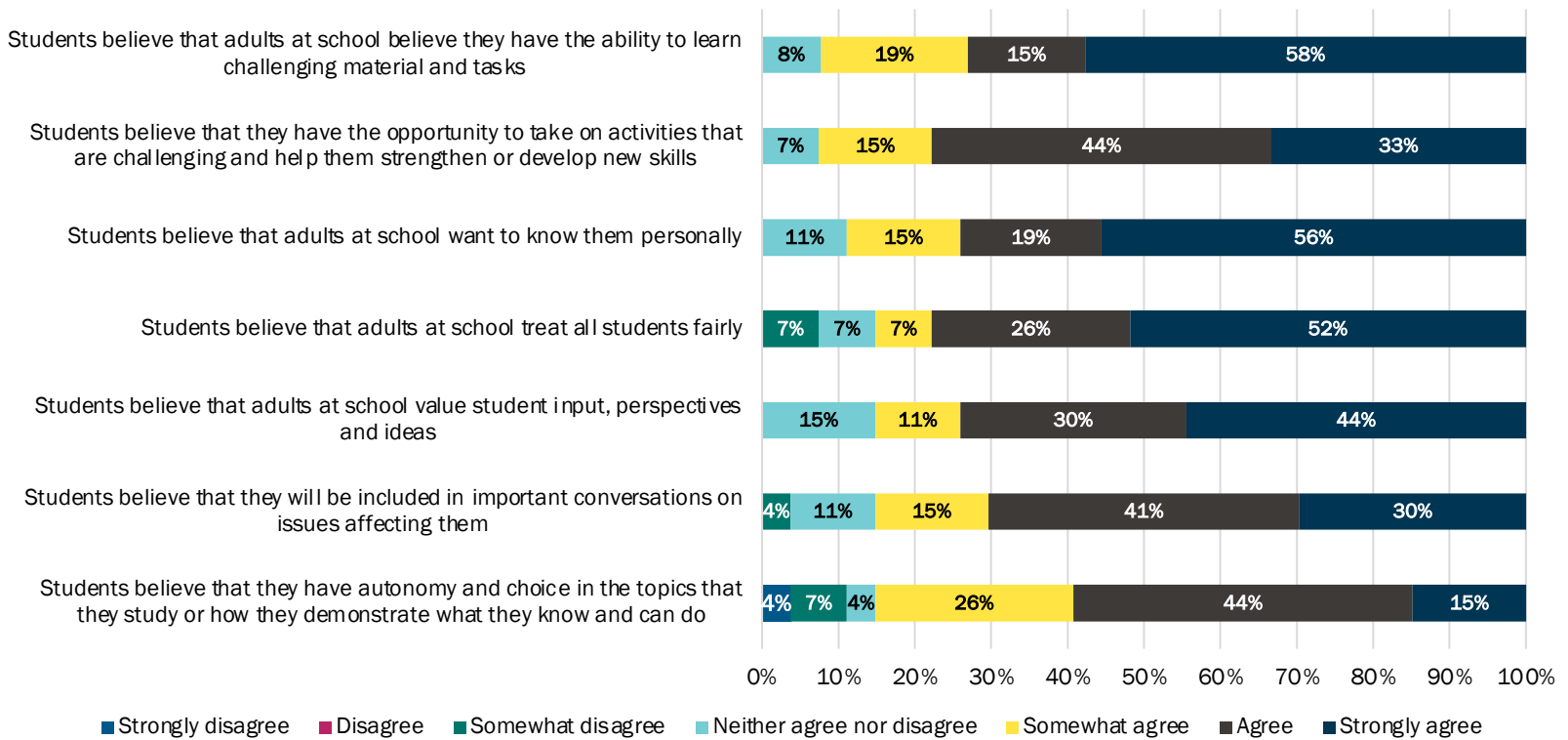
Educators increased support for student-centered learning

Participants were asked about the importance of student voice, educator-student relationships, and high expectations for student success. Notably, participants' endorsement of these factors, especially student voice, deepened over the course of Cohort I, suggesting that educators are adopting more student-centered behaviors in their practice.

- 59% either agreed or strongly agreed that “students believe that they have autonomy and choice in the topics that they study or how they demonstrate what they know and can do” (+10 percentage points from beginning of initiative)
- 74% either agreed or strongly agreed that “students believe that adults at school value student input, perspectives and ideas” (+15 percentage points from beginning of initiative)
- 71% either agreed or strongly agreed that “students believe that they will be included in important conversations on issues affecting them” (+22 percentage points from beginning of initiative)



Distribution of post-survey responses



changes in practice

overview of the section

In this section we highlight changes in teacher/educator practice.



what we found

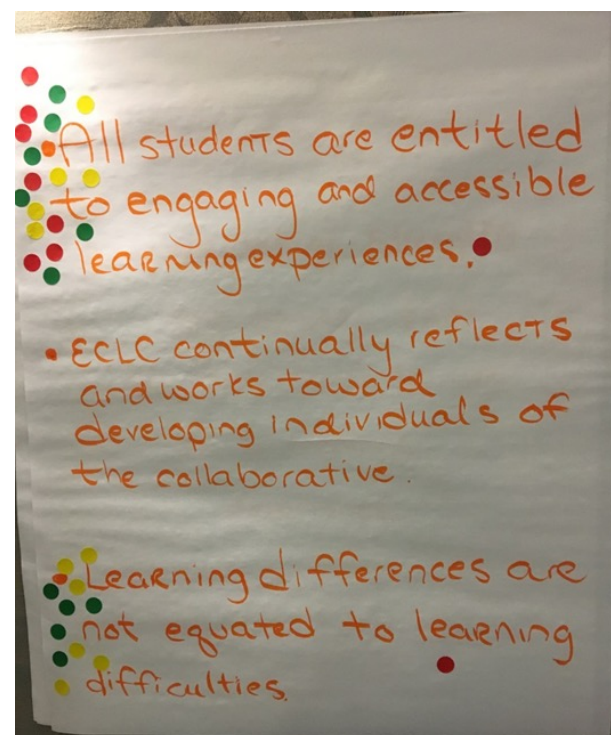
Educator practice

With changes in mindsets or beliefs come changes in practice.

By the end of Phase I, participants were already reporting some early changes in practice in several areas, including: increasing student voice and choice in the classroom; using more culturally-relevant instructional and family engagement practices, and using data to inform practice.

During Phase II, targeted professional development focused on Multi-Tier System of Support (MTSS), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and cultural proficiency (Racial Identity and Systems Exploration or RISE). Not surprisingly, at the end of Phase II, reported changes in practice primarily focused on changes in instructional practice related to MTSS and UDL.

Educators also described using more student-centered practices, a reflection perhaps of their deepening endorsement, over the course of this project, of the importance of student voice in student success.



“As I plan lessons, [I] think about creating multiple access points for students, identifying ways to meet students where they are at and then help them achieve academic success. For example, in an Algebra I class there is a group of students [who are] failing. After observing the class, I noticed a few things 1) the teacher is not providing wait time. A problem is given and the first student to raise their hand puts it on the board. Meanwhile, other students are still reading the problem. 2) the worksheet had very mixed complexity of problems rather than building in complexity so that the students could feel successful and then be motivated to attempt more difficult problems.”

Cohort I member from Swampscott



“As I run our school’s data meetings we are now discussing all of our students...not just those who are struggling to meet benchmarks. We are making plans for intervention AND extension now. **This is a shift and it is a result of my experience with the MTSS workshop.**”

Cohort I member from Danvers Public Schools



“Since participating in ECLC, I have spent more time seeking student input. The empathy interviews have helped me listen to students and make changes to my practice.”

Cohort I member from Rockport Public Schools



“We are trying to incorporate a means of gaining the student perspective by having all students fill out a survey about themselves. One of our valuable teachers has been doing this for years and sees it as really helpful when students are struggling to consider what they think they do well/see as success/want to do in the future.”

Cohort I member from Swampscott



what we found

Educator practice

At the end of Phase II, educators were less likely to report changes in their practice related to cultural proficiency-- the third topic of professional development-- compared to MTSS and UDL. We attribute this to several factors, the first is timing. The RISE series came at the tail end of Phase II (and was not completed until after the administration of the post-survey).

Exit surveys from the RISE sessions reveal a second and more critical reason. Participants rated the RISE series highly, and in most cases, commented how valuable it was both professionally and personally. At the same time, many participants also shared that they were unsure about how to introduce topics on racism, prejudice, and white supremacy to both their colleagues and in the classroom, fearing how colleagues and parents might react.

Several participants were also concerned about their limited cultural proficiency and not wanting to “cause offense” in speaking to their students.

The ECLC leadership team tried to calibrate expectations about what could be accomplished in these sessions – the RISE sessions were designed as an initial introduction and participants were not expected to be equipped to teach colleagues, students or other people in their schools and districts about RISE topics. The team acknowledges that, going forward, it should be even more explicit about expectations and remind participants that transformative work must begin with self and then move to a plan to implement what they’ve learned in the classroom. The team also recognizes that a “blueprint” of sorts about what comes next in their long journey toward cultural responsiveness could be very useful for educators.



changes in district practice

overview of the section

In this section, we highlight some key changes in practice that were implemented by Cohort I districts.*



*Haverhill is not represented in this section, due to low participation in the data collection.

changes in district practice

Beverly: *Personalized Professional Development Pathways*

“We are much more cohesive in our approach to providing those critical components of instruction - anchor charts and other visuals, tech enhanced support - speech to text, and working as a school to promote a sense of community and ownership.”

In Beverly, the district plan focused on supporting teachers’ professional learning and development to address the key goal of improving instructional practice. During this school year, all professional development has been directly aligned to the four goals listed in their district plan created in Phase I: social-emotional learning (SEL), universal design for learning (UDL), project-based learning, and rigorous curriculum. Teachers had the opportunity to choose one of the four topics on which to focus their professional learning this year, with the district providing resources and support to achieve those goals. The result has been greater cohesiveness in instructional practice across the district. Additionally, the goals established in the district plan were also tied to budget discussions, so anyone putting forward a budget proposal also had to align their proposal to one of the four goals.

District Profile

Number of schools – 8

Enrollment – 4700

White – 76%

Latinx – 14%

Black – 3%

Asian – 2%

Students with disabilities – 19%

High Needs – 40%

Economically Disadvantaged – 26%

English Learner – 4%



Source: District Profile numbers taken from MADESE school and district profiles (2019).

High-needs is the unduplicated count of all students who belong to at least one of the following groups: English Learners, Students with Disabilities, or Economically Disadvantaged; therefore, the total % high-needs is lower than the sum of all groups.

changes in district practice

Danvers: *Moving Forward with the Implementation of MTSS*

“The district has implemented a 30-minute intervention block daily to provide each student with what they need. Scheduling this consistent time was a huge step in moving forward with the implementation of MTSS.”

As a direct result of the district work and learning in the ECLC workshops Danvers has made and continues to make structural changes necessary to implement multi-tier systems of support (MTSS) and other instructional approaches with fidelity. For example, the district has modified its schedule, implementing a 30-minute intervention/extension block daily during which teachers provide students with support they need, particularly Tier 2 needs for which students can receive more targeted support in small groups. The extension of the schedule to support these interventions is important as the goal is to keep students from missing any core instruction or other Tier 1 activities that might make it more difficult to catch up. Additionally, the district has also worked to heighten awareness and implementation of the social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies, especially at the elementary level, by providing a 15-minute block every morning to work on a specific competency, as well as professional development to strengthen relationships between students and staff.



Source: District Profile numbers taken from MADESE school and district profiles (2019)

District Profile

Number of schools -7

Enrollment – 3417

White – 84%

Latinx – 9%

Black – 2%

Asian – 3%

Students with disabilities – 18%

High Needs – 32%

Economically Disadvantaged – 18%

English Learner – 1%

changes in district practice-

Gloucester: Teacher Leadership in Promoting Cultural Proficiency

“We are now talking about culture!!! At least more people are talking in more spaces including formal/official school meetings. This is an enormous shift in our district.”

During summer 2019, a group of Gloucester teachers who had participated in the Teacher Topical Teams decided to engage in a book-study of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond, which had been recommended by one of the facilitators of the Teacher Topical Team devoted to Cultural Proficiency. In a show of support for the teachers’ leadership, the district assistant superintendent joined their book study, which led to the creation of a mini-course for other Gloucester teachers that was presented at one of the district’s professional development days. The district’s second-year teacher mentees also used this book for a book-study, as did the district leadership team, who read and discussed a chapter as part of each of their meetings. Throughout the school year, educators from across the district at a variety of levels have all had some exposure to the book, for the first time providing Gloucester educators a common language and central organizing concept to think and talk about cultural responsiveness and higher-order thinking skills and why these concepts are essential for all learners. This represents an enormous shift in culture for the district.

District Profile
Number of schools – 8
Enrollment – 2851
White – 81%
Latinx – 11%
Black – 2%
Asian – 1%
Students with disabilities – 26%
High Needs – 53%
Economically Disadvantaged – 38%
English Learner – 7%



changes in district practice

Rockport: SEL at the High School Weekly Assemblies

“The weekly assembly at my high school is designed to foster student-teacher relationships with students and to develop community. All work around SEL.”

In Rockport, the district plan has focused on improving social-emotional learning (SEL) across the district. For instance, at the high school, the principal with input from teachers has implemented weekly school assemblies. Every Tuesday morning, the entire school community gathers for a 20-25-minute assembly focused on a theme related to the SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Teachers and students volunteer or are recruited to share something at the assemblies, such as a poem, a story, an interest, or a talent. The goal of the assemblies is to foster relationships among students and between students and teachers. School and district leaders report that as students and teachers get to know each other better, students’ feelings of belonging have increased as they identify more with teachers and feel that their teachers understand them better. The assemblies also prompted a group of high school students to mentor students at the middle school, providing a much-needed scaffold of support in the wake of a stabbing incident at the middle school early in the school year.

District Profile
Number of schools – 3
Enrollment – 851
White – 95%
Latinx – 1%
Black – 1%
Asian – 2%
Students with disabilities – 21%
High Needs – 36%
Economically Disadvantaged – 20%
English Learner – 1%



changes in district practice

Swampscott: *Aligned Professional Development*

“More continuity in district focus over time - particular emphasis on SEL and the depth at which we are tackling the growth of our practices to support students' SEL.”

This year, the Swampscott district plan focused on creating a strong multi-tier system of support (MTSS), providing systematic professional development on social-emotional learning (SEL) to deepen capacity in this area across the district, and administering a survey on cultural competency. These goals have led to district administrators and school leaders engaging in more intentional discussions about what good teaching and instruction looks like. Related to their MTSS work, Swampscott also embarked on an ambitious plan to create a comprehensive written guide on implementing building-based Student Support Teams (SSTs), which are collaborative, school-based, problem-solving teams organized to provide support to teachers in addressing academic, medical, behavioral/emotional and/or other issues which may interfere with a student’s ability to achieve. The creation of SSTs is important for the delivery of services—the right intervention at the right dosage at the right time, so that students aren’t needlessly referred to special education. The guide has been made available to all ECLC school districts.



District Profile

Number of schools – 5

Enrollment – 2218

White – 79%

Latinx – 12%

Black – 4%

Asian – 2%

Students with disabilities – 18%

High Needs – 34%

Economically Disadvantaged – 16%

English Learner – 6%

“One thing that was reinforced at this meeting was the importance of slow and steady wins the race. Our [district] plan is a long-term plan and we need to understand that in order to do it well we need to keep our eyes on the prize and that **we are in this for the long haul.**”

District Lead Team member



a learning community approach

overview of the section

This section highlights participant feedback on the value of the learning community approach.



a learning community approach

The Learning Community

ECLC has been successful in creating a strong sense of network formation and cohesion across the six Cohort I districts. This sense of community and cohesion has the potential to grow and last beyond the duration of the formal learning community.

The learning community approach is a major strength of the initiative providing a clear value proposition for participating districts. According to participants, the opportunity for educators across six districts to meet regularly and develop a strong cohort was one of the most salient aspects of the project. Interestingly, as mentioned earlier in this report, another benefit of the learning community was increased within district collaboration, which participants reported was important because they often work in silos in their districts and collaborate most with others in similar roles (e.g. special education teachers, reading coaches etc.). ECLC brought together colleagues who do not typically work together in the district, enabling them to bring valuable perspectives to one another and to see issues through a different lens. While within district collaboration continued to deepen in Phase II, participants seemed ready for more cross-district collaboration.

“The greatest strength has been building collaboration both within the district and then also within our surrounding communities, where we kind of operated as silos before.”

Focus group I participant



We are **not alone** in our dilemmas.

District Lead Team participant



“I am a long-time educator and this is the first time I remember participating in a district level initiative that built connections across the district and across districts. **I have learned from other districts who have journeyed along with us in the ECLC work.** We share ideas and have supported each other through the times when we were struggling. My learning was also greatly enhanced by my partnership with an in-district colleague I had never met.”

Cohort I participant from Gloucester Public Schools



a learning community approach

The Learning Community

ECLC supported cross-district collaboration and provided very valuable learning experience through site visits where participants could witness what other districts and/or schools were doing and see how buildings and classrooms are designed.

Learning Community activities also facilitated networking, relationship-building, deeper conversations, valuable feedback loops, and camaraderie across districts. For example, new administrators mentioned how ECLC facilitated their relationship-building, fostered learning about their own districts as well as their neighboring districts; and helped to crystallize priority issues that the district and region are facing. The learning community approach provided opportunities for teachers from across the six districts to interact with each other. While district administrators are likely to interact cross-districts, teachers are far less likely to have that opportunity.

Finally, another key benefit of the learning community approach is that it provided an “economy of scale” with respect to professional development. District administrators pointed out that, because of associated costs, their districts would not have been able to provide the kind of professional development ECLC provided to their educators.

“The meetings have been extremely beneficial. The conversations across districts allowed us time to share ideas, thoughts, and strategies. It has also promoted collaboration, leadership and a shared vision to support our students.”

Social-Emotional Topical Group member



“One of the benefits for us has been the site visits [and] for me personally being able to connect and see what other districts are doing [which] I think that will lead to further conversations [of] what I've experienced so far, that's been the major benefit of the learning community.”

Focus group I participant



“Initially, it was reassuring to find out that the struggles and barriers I was experiencing in Rockport were not unlike those of the other ECLC districts. Having the ongoing opportunity to consult, collaborate, and rejuvenate with other leads/administrators was incredibly beneficial. To be able to share what was happening in our district and to get feedback was encouraging, specifically at times when I was feeling as though I was not moving things forward or having a positive impact.”

Cohort I participant from Rockport Public Schools



a learning community approach

Reflections on ECLC

Overall, Cohort I participants were very satisfied their experience in the Essex County Learning Community, and the initiative delivered in several ways to support educator reflection, mindsets, and practices:

- 82% either agreed or strongly agreed that it encouraged them to reflect on their practice as an educator
- 74% either agreed or strongly agreed that it motivated them to do something different in their practice
- 67% either agreed or strongly agreed that it helped them to identify specific strategies or ideas of how to improve their practice, and
- More than half (55%) either agreed or strongly agreed that at times the experience challenged their ideas or beliefs about working with students

“I am impressed with the quality of the ECLC program and organization. I appreciated the structures of the day and the meaningfulness of the work. You all do amazing work for educators, and thus, for our students!”

Cohort I participant from
Rockport Public Schools



recommendations

overview of the section

This section highlights recommendations for future cohorts based on our findings.



recommendations

Professional development

Continue to provide high-quality professional development, and allow for differentiation across districts and participants.

Overall, participants rated the provided professional development highly and noted that in most cases individual districts would not have been able to provide similar opportunities to their teachers/staff. At the same time, participants wondered if the sessions were covering too much at once. Engaging in three topics for professional development (i.e. MTSS, UDL and Cultural Proficiency/RISE) in one year, along with other events/meetings, was quite demanding for participants who suggest that professional development focus on just one (perhaps two) topics to facilitate learning and implementation and not overwhelm participants. Additionally, participants noted that district capacity varied across the three topics, as some districts had more experience in some areas prior to ECLC participation; and therefore, recommend conducting a needs assessment to support differentiation and/or varying entry points in professional development offerings.

"The work with ECLC last year, and this summer, has been the best professional development of my career. ECLC's mission is aligned with my own professional philosophy. It is empowering, energizing, and inspiring to join with like-minded individuals and so many experts in 'doing the work'".

ECLC participant from Beverly Public Schools



recommendations

Cross-district collaboration

Continue to create structures to facilitate collaboration, especially cross-district collaboration.

Increased within and cross-district collaboration were two positive outcomes of the ECLC. Within-district collaboration was key during Phase I when districts were creating their plans. During Phase II, participants found cross-district collaboration especially beneficial and wanted more.

“The idea of meeting with six districts and really developing a strong cohort was one of the most exciting things about the project. . . and thinking explicitly about building the strength of the entire cohort . . . and in order to do that we actually get these six teams a little more tightly bonded so they feel super comfortable picking up the phone and calling each other or do work groups on their own.”

Focus group participant



recommendations

Support around cultural proficiency

Offer and provide support to districts in their work to implement more culturally responsive education and practices.

While participants acknowledged that all three professional development topics required a great deal of work to implement, participants appeared to express the greatest concern around the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices, highlighting a sense of personal risk-taking that was not true for the other topics. To that end, ECLC organizers should work with each Cohort I district to assess if and how they can support that district's implementation of their goals around cultural proficiency.

“I was extremely thrilled to be here for this session. The everyday dilemmas that we have in school are rooted in our ability or inability to know and understand one another, and the students we serve. I am inspired to think about ways to infuse this work with my staff so that they can do this work with their students. This is not the stuff to bake into an initiative- it has to become the way in which we do our work together as adults.”

RISE participant



recommendations

Roles and expectations for participation

Better define and communicate roles, expectations and time commitments for the various groups and structures created, especially those for teachers.

At the end of Phase I, participants expressed that participating in ECLC was a worthwhile, yet very demanding, time-consuming, and fast-paced experience. This theme continued with participants saying that Phase II was even more fast-paced and time-consuming than the previous phase. Especially among teachers on the Teacher Leadership Council, there was some uncertainty about their roles and expectations, deliverables and how their work would impact change (echoing similar confusion about the role of Teacher Topical groups in Phase I) suggesting the need to provide better defined charters for various group structures throughout the process.

“I think participants need to know about how much they are signing up for at the beginning. . . Much of the work has been valuable and I learned a great deal but it was WAY more than I originally thought I was signing up for. I also struggled with how much time I was out of class attending meetings/workshops and/or away from my own family and children for nightly meetings.”

ECLC participant from Danvers Public Schools



recommendations

Structure of meetings

Build more focus and flexibility into agendas and pay attention to pacing and the setting of activities.

Participants appreciated the rich learning opportunities provided, but consistently mentioned that agendas were often “too ambitious” and included so many activities that items later in the agenda, including team time or sharing across districts would often get short shrift because of time constraints. To avoid this, participants recommend creating agendas with fewer, more-focused activities, along with better pacing of activities and a willingness to adapt agendas in real time.

“Some of the meeting times, there were times where we would get to the best part of the piece where we are all working together . . .and just starting to get going as a team to do the activity or exercise and then the timer would ding and we would move to a whole different segment of the program. There were a number of times where really great things were just cut off in the middle and then it led to something else.”

Focus group participant



recommendations

Promote ECLC across Essex County

Promote ECLC broadly across Essex County and within districts to support buy-in and sustainability.

Several district lead representatives indicated that they need help messaging more widely to their districts about ECLC (vision, goals, etc.) so they can engage educators beyond the “choir” or folks who are already bought into the core ideas and values supported by ECLC. Creating materials or other resources that promote ECLC more broadly will help district leads and current participants spread the word within their districts.

“[Help] leaders learn how to deliver the message back to the districts, especially to people that may not be so apt to jump on board with what you're trying to accomplish. Most of the time . . . we're choosing teachers and administrators that are already leading, but if we really want to make systemic change, [it would be good] to help leaders learn how to bring reluctant people on board as well.”

Focus group participant



recommendations

ECLC sustainability

Develop and/or communicate a long-term vision and plan for ECLC sustainability.

As “early adopters” and beneficiaries of the ECLC, Cohort 1 participants are invested in its continued and long-term success and what it means for improving education across Essex County. They strongly suggest that a long-term vision and plan for sustainability can help to guide program development and activities in the future. For instance, one district administrator expressed that “if one of the goals is to build capacity as an entire group/region” among people who will be working together for the next decade, then that would require more proactive relationship-building, intentional cross-district activities, projects, and tasks especially in Phase 2.

In the shorter term, Cohort 1 participants also want to maintain and deepen their connections as part of the ECLC even as their active participation winds down. They are excited to continue the work of implementing their district plans and building relationships with other Essex County educators, and shared their ideas for continued engagement.

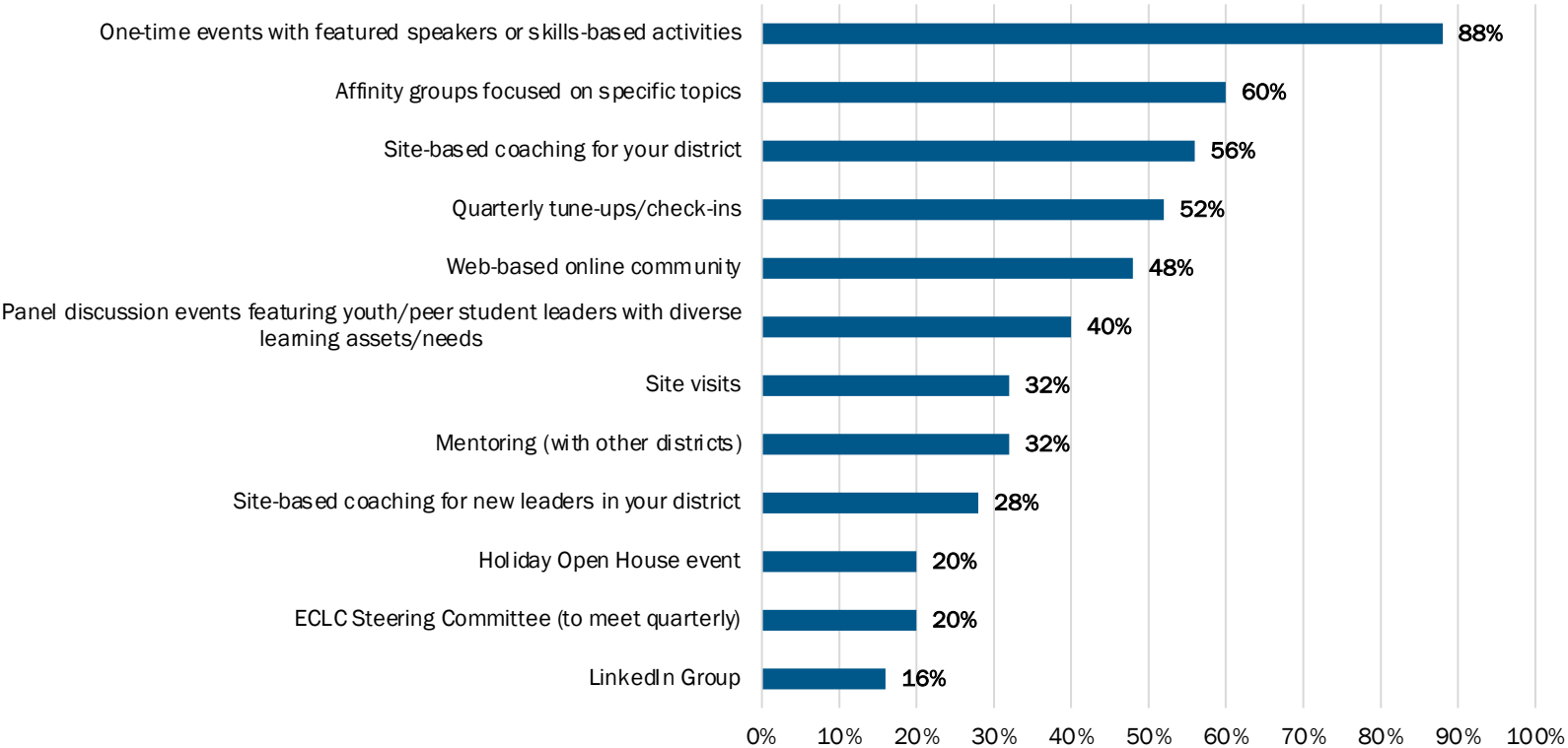
“Think about branding.... ECLC hasn’t really caught on and understood in the district the way we would like it to, [and] it’s not quite clear to me, even to this day, whether the whole point is to create a learning community that then sustains itself to improve educational practice or if it’s to push certain things like MTSS and UDL. It’s not clear to me kind of what the point is.”

Focus group participant



recommendations

For continued engagement with the ECLC, which of the following opportunities might you be interested in, if any?



“It was a valuable opportunity to pause, reflect, and articulate what we have been doing ourselves and to hear from other people what they were doing. I am aware that participating in ECLC has been a tremendous privilege, and I feel a great sense of responsibility to build on the work we have done. **Thank you for your encouragement and support all along the way! And thank for celebrating us and our work.**”

Teacher Leadership Council member



Essex County Learning Community

The Essex County Learning Community (ECLC) is a cross-district experience for educators from public school districts just north of Boston. The goal of the ECLC is to use a community of practitioners approach to lift up and scale district, school, and classroom strategies that enable educators to better serve students with diverse learning assets and needs. It is directed by Full Frame Communications and the Center for Collaborative Education, with funding from the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation.



Essex County
LEARNING COMMUNITY



PETER & ELIZABETH
TOWER FOUNDATION