Essex County Learning Community
Cohort 2 Final Evaluation Report

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Transforming schools for student success

Essex County
LEARNING COMMUNITY

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introduction

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

About the 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.

The goal of the 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. Cohort 1, which ran from May 2018 until December 2019, included educators from six Essex County districts (Beverly, Danvers, Gloucester, Haverhill, Rockport, and Swampscott) and consisted of two phases. In Phase I educators engaged in cross-district professional development from May through December 2018, resulting in each district creating a plan to address identified challenges/opportunities. The second phase of Cohort 1 ran from January 2019 through December 2019 and focused on districts' implementation of their plans with continued collaboration and deeper and more targeted professional development.

ESSEX COUNTY, MA

About the ECLC

In January 2020, a second cohort of five school districts joined the ECLC (Andover, Essex North Shore Agricultural and Technical School (ENSATS), Hamilton-Wenham, Manchester-Essex, and Saugus). The ECLC was able to hold two in-person events before the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted all events. The organizers of the ECLC adapted immediately, shifting all offerings to virtual meetings, and changing the topics of the offerings to serve the immediate needs of educators. Along with shifting to virtual offerings, in response to requests from Cohort 1 participants, the ECLC adapted the professional learning approach and opened most virtual offerings up to educators from Cohort 1 districts.

ESSEX COUNTY, MA

Why we need the ECLC

In recent years, the participating districts have experienced substantial demographic changes.

- Over the past ten years the number of Latinx students has increased by 70%, the number of Asian students by 36%, and the number of Black students by 30%, while the number of White students has decreased by 14%.

- Over this same time period the number of ELs has increased by 72% (from 3% of all students to 5% of all students) and the number of SWDs has increased by 11% (from 18% to 21% of all students).

Why we need the 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.

There are also substantial disparities between student groups on key metrics including high school graduation and dropout rates as week as performance on the state standardized test, making it clear that the current system does not work for all students.

Cohort 1 and 2 district 4-year chronic absenteeism rate (2021)
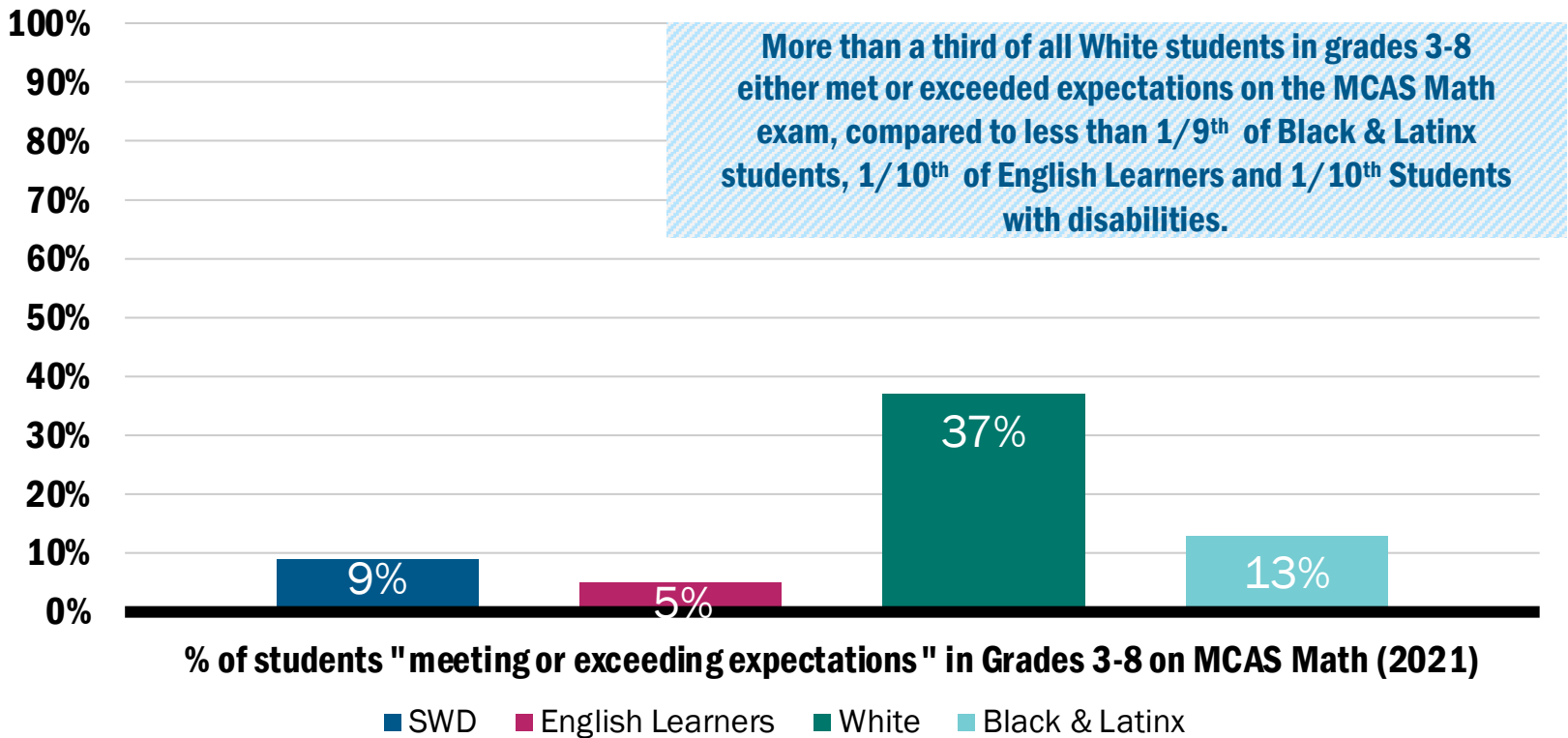
18% all students

15% White students

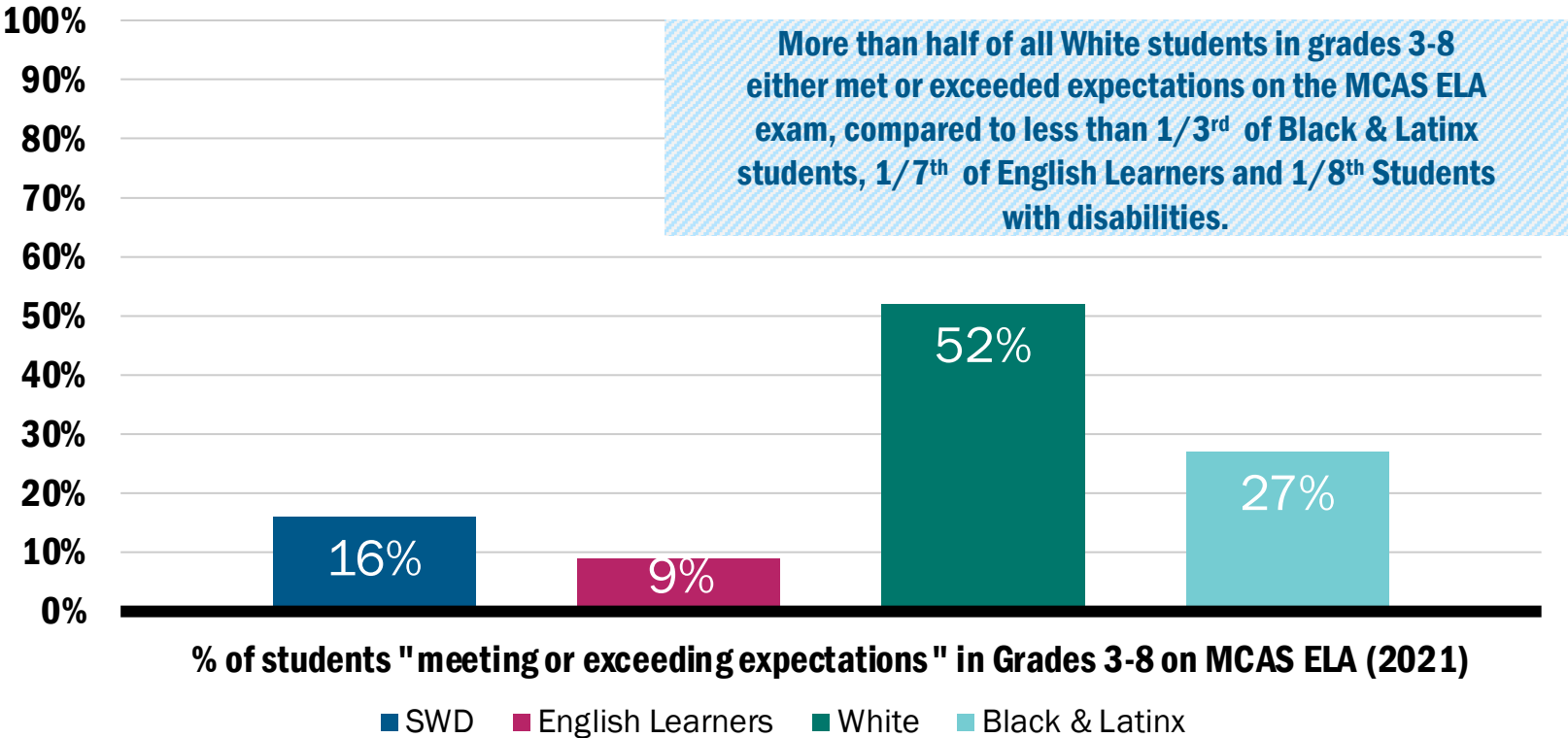33% Black & Latinx students

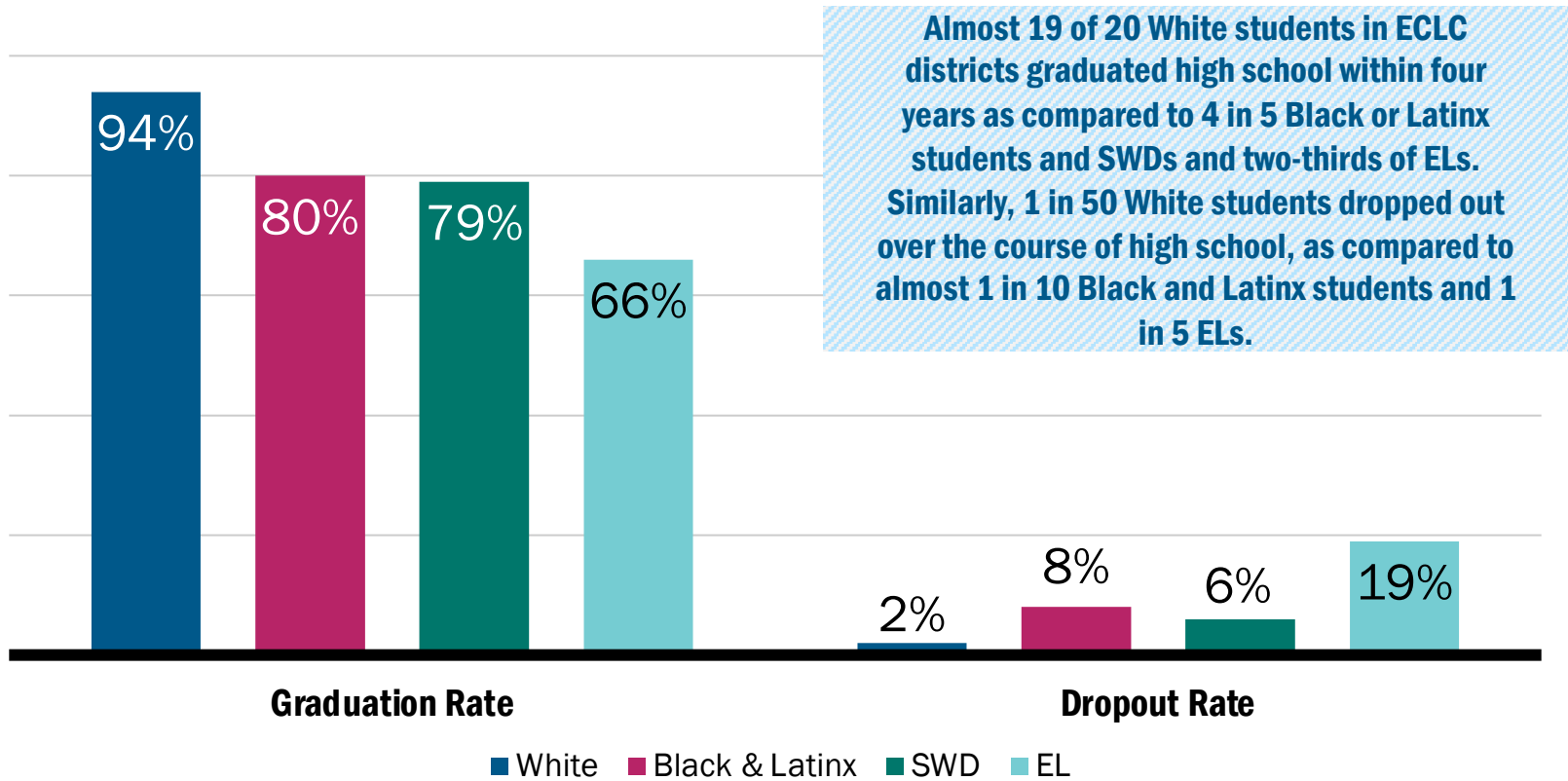27% Students with disabilities

36% English Learners

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Source: MADESE school and district profiles (2019)

2021 Math MCAS performance

More than a third of all White students in grades 3-8 either met or exceeded expectations on the MCAS Math exam, compared to less than 1/9th of Black & Latinx students, 1/10th of English Learners and 1/10th Students with disabilities.

Chart: % of students "meeting or exceeding expectations" in Grades 3-8 on MCAS Math (2021)

- SWD: 9%
- English Learners: 5%
- White: 37%
- Black & Latinx: 13%

% of students "meeting or exceeding expectations" in Grades 3-8 on MCAS Math (2021)

■ SWD ■ English Learners ■ White ■ Black & Latinx

2021 ELA MCAS performance

More than half of all White students in grades 3-8 either met or exceeded expectations on the MCAS ELA exam, compared to less than 1/3rd of Black & Latinx students, 1/7th of English Learners and 1/8th Students with disabilities.

% of students "meeting or exceeding expectations" in Grades 3-8 on MCAS ELA (2021)

■ SWD   ■ English Learners   ■ White   ■ Black & Latinx

2021 four-year cohort graduation and dropout rates

Almost 19 of 20 White students in ECLC districts graduated high school within four years as compared to 4 in 5 Black or Latinx students and SWDs and two-thirds of ELs. Similarly, 1 in 50 White students dropped out over the course of high school, as compared to almost 1 in 10 Black and Latinx students and 1 in 5 ELs.

Graduation Rate: White 94%, Black & Latinx 80%, SWD 79%, EL 66%

Dropout Rate: White 2%, Black & Latinx 8%, SWD 6%, EL 19%

Legend: ■ White ■ Black & Latinx ■ SWD ■ EL

How easy or difficult do you find it to teach students with the following characteristics. Students who… (n=37)

A third or more of pre-survey respondents indicated that they find it either "difficult" or "very difficult" to work with students with a first language other than English, students with gaps in their foundational knowledge, and students who resist conforming to traditional school culture or instructional approaches
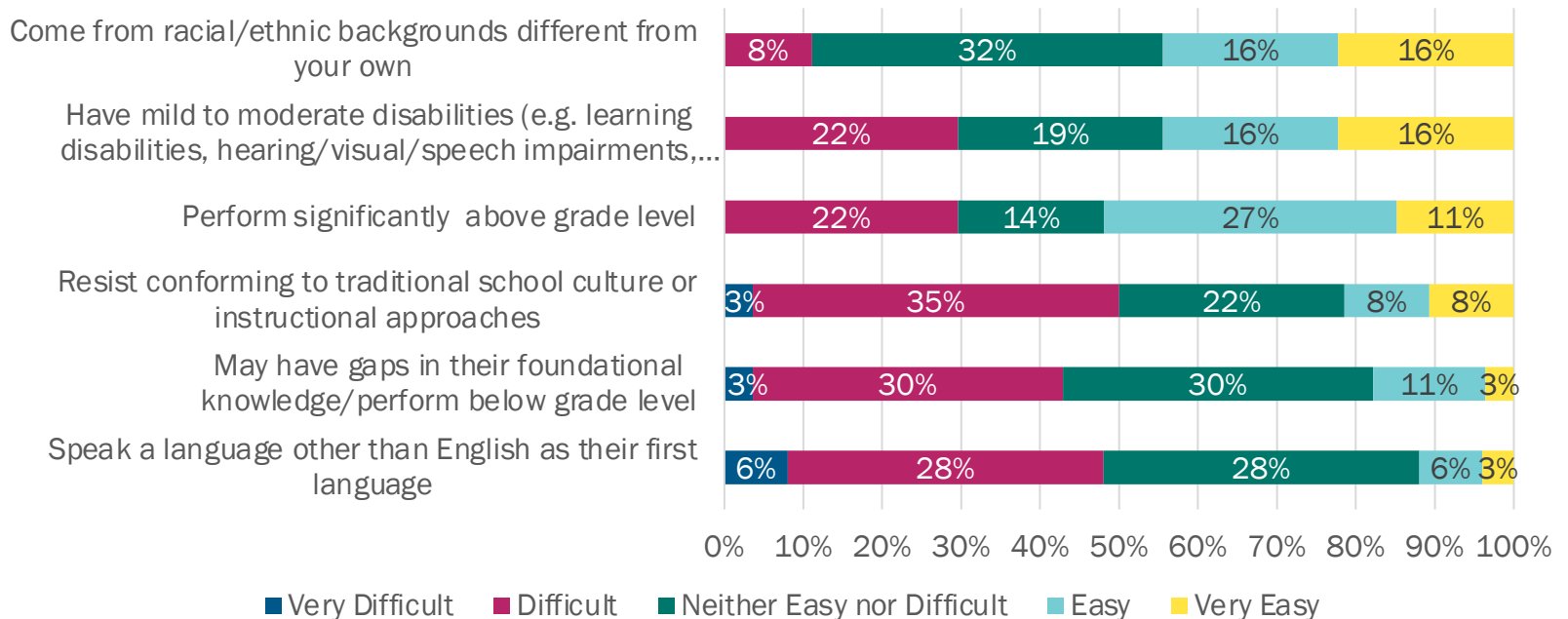
Why we need ECLC

The ECLC 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. The ECLC believes 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.

The ECLC provides a critical space for educators to learn from experts and other educators in the region to improve practice and change mindsets and beliefs.
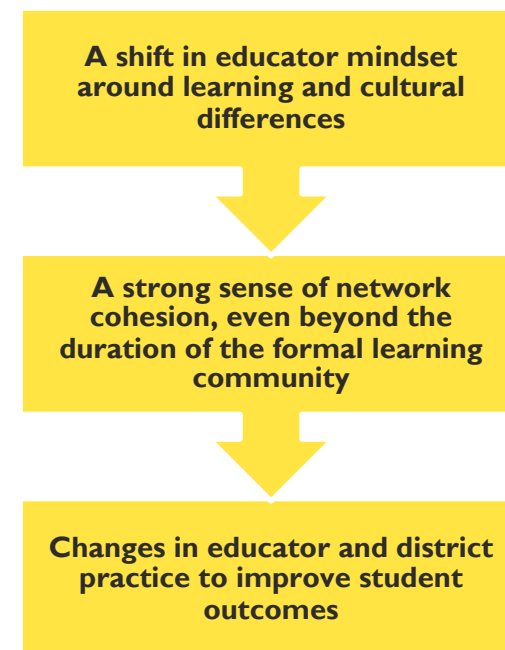
Evaluation questions

The following questions guided the evaluation of Cohort 2 of the Essex County Learning Community:

- What have been the benefits of the learning community approach? How and to what extent has the learning community approach facilitated learning and other network outcomes?
- How, if at all, have educator mindsets[3], educator practices, and school and/or district practices changed as a result of participating in the ECLC?

To answer these questions, the research and evaluation team at the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) utilized several data collection approaches: administrative data (i.e., attendance at ECLC offerings), event exit surveys, pre- and post-surveys, and in-depth interviews with participants.

The ECLC experience was designed to achieve the following outcomes:

A shift in educator mindset around learning and cultural differences

A strong sense of network cohesion, even beyond the duration of the formal learning community

Changes in educator and district practice to improve student outcomes

Impact of Covid-19 on evaluation

Like the ECLC overall, the Cohort 2 evaluation had to evolve in response to the pandemic.

- The evaluation **expanded** to include participants from Cohort 1

- The CCE evaluation team did not administer the pre-survey to educators from Cohort 1 districts, but Cohort 1 educators were included in the post-survey.

- The pre- and post-survey have two different, but potentially overlapping groups of respondents and therefore, the survey results can only **provide context for the information shared in open-response questions and interviews**.

- The bulk of the data collection for the evaluation took place from January to March 2022 as a new variant of COVID was once again creating school disruptions.

- Participation in the survey and interviews was lower than originally anticipated. 37 educators from Cohort 2 districts completed the pre-survey, while 22% of the invited educators from Cohort 1 and 2 districts responded to the post-survey. The evaluation team interviewed ten participants across 5 districts, 7 from Cohort 1 districts and 3 from Cohort 2 districts.

what the ECLC did during Cohort 2

overview of section

This section briefly summarizes the work that occurred during Cohort 2

Cohort 2 Goal

The initial goal of Cohort 2 of the ECLC was to grow the learning community by adding additional districts into the network, providing community convenings and professional learning for educators from the new districts.

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Cohort 2 Implementation

- Cohort began in January 2020 and the ECLC was able to offer just two in-person events in early 2020 before the Covid pandemic began

- The ECLC reacted immediately, reaching out to participants to see what types of supports and resources they wanted during the unprecedented school year.

- The ECLC completely shifted delivery of professional learning and the format of the learning community, moving to virtual offerings, and opened up offerings to educators from Cohort 1 districts.

- The ECLC shifted the content of offerings early in the pandemic to help with the immediate needs of educators (e.g. attending to the mental health of teachers, strategies for how to best use Zoom).

- After the acute needs of the pandemic were addressed, the ECLC was able to return to providing core professional learning opportunities around educating students with diverse learning assets.

Cohort 2 Participation

- From January 2020 to December 2021, a total of 289 educators participated in ECLC offerings – 140 educators from Cohort 2 districts and 149 educators from Cohort 1 districts.

- Participants averaged 3.4 offerings – 2.2 for educators from Cohort 1 districts and 5.7 offerings for educators from Cohort 2 districts – with a range of 1 to 37 offerings attended.

- Among the educators from Cohort 1 districts, there were 77 new participants who did not participate in any Cohort 1 offerings. These new participants averaged 2.9 offerings, while returning Cohort 1 educators were more heavily involved averaging 6.0 offerings.

Building a learning community

overview of section

This section discusses the strengths and challenges of building the ECLC learning community

What we found

This section discusses the ways in which the ECLC was successful at building and strengthening a learning community, the benefits of the learning community approach, and the remaining challenges and barriers to building a community of practitioners across Essex County.

- The ECLC provided critical support during the pandemic
- The most direct way that the ECLC fostered a sense of community among participants was through relevant, supportive, and high-quality professional learning offerings.
- Facilitators provided high-quality professional learning, but also created a learning environment where educators felt respected and treated like experts, while also feeling safe to ask questions and ask for additional support outside of the offerings.
- The ECLC excels at fostering within district collaboration.
- Cross-district collaboration remains elusive.

The ECLC provided crucial support during pandemic

The ECLC completely shifted delivery of professional learning and the format of the learning community, moving to virtual offerings, and opening up offerings to educators from Cohort 1 districts.

- The ECLC shifted the content of offerings early in the pandemic to help with the immediate needs of educators.
- The ECLC offered sessions on trauma, approaches and resources for working on Zoom, and ECLC presenters adapted content on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS), which helped participants better structure and organize their remote and hybrid instruction.

"I've been a teacher for a long time. I would say these last few years have been absolutely bar none the most difficult I've ever experienced…. so belonging to this community was really important for me for holding that hope, like for recharging my batteries during that time." - Cohort 1 teacher

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The ECLC provided crucial support during pandemic

- By adapting in these ways, the ECLC provided educators with crucial support and tools to deal with the unprecedented learning needs.

- Educators found that the ECLC offerings served as a "*haven*" and a "*safe space*" and were even restorative – a respite from worrying only about pandemic related crises and providing the time and space for educators to think about larger educational goals.

- The benefits of the professional learning approach were abundantly clear during the pandemic. Uniformly, participants shared how the ECLC offerings imparted relevant and important emotional and technical support and resources, which helped teachers "*survive*" throughout all stages of the pandemic.

building a learning community

The ECLC provides high-quality learning opportunities

The ECLC also helped strengthen the learning community through high-quality professional learning that imparted critical information, while also making participants feel like experts.

- Regardless of virtual or in-person, participants praised the exceptional quality of professional learning
- Educators were encouraged to share their practices and experiences with other educators, which made participants feel like collaborators and experts. Participants reflected how this approach is in stark contrast to the "sit and get" format typical for in-district professional learning.

"The level of professional development is just not comparable to other professional development we have received. So, to be able to work with Emily on trauma and to be able to work with Gabby on UDL, and to be able to listen to Mark Brackett on some of the social emotional ... like, they're some of the best in the field. So, to get that information firsthand and be able to digest it and use it in a very supportive environment ... it's kind of a once in a lifetime opportunity. I'm just extremely grateful that I've had the opportunity to go through the ride with ECLC." - teacher from Cohort 1 district

The ECLC creates a personalized network of experts and resources

The ECLC has developed multiple layers of support and expertise for participants, creating a network of personalized support that participants are comfortable accessing

- Facilitators have created an environment where participants feel comfortable and "safe" to ask questions to presenters and other ECLC educators
- The ECLC organizers provided curated resources and connected educators with consultants to help districts move to next stage of their work. Examples include connecting educators to resources and organizations that help to deepen anti-racism work and implement project-based learning

"ECLC is like no other professional development I have ever had in my 20 years of being an educator. Everything was relevant and they are always available" – survey respondent

The ECLC fosters within-district collaboration

Cohort 2 participants report how the ECLC brings together educators within a district that normally do not interact working as peers and collaborators.

- By offering all participants the same offerings and pursuing a defined goal, the ECLC creates vertical alignment for teachers across grade levels and enables unique opportunities for collaboration between teachers and administrators.
- For instance, teachers at an elementary school shared how for the first time they worked with teachers and administrators at different schools in their district to develop a shared strategy to improve culturally responsive practices.
- As a result of the within-district collaboration, teachers feel far more empowered to take on more of a leadership role in their school and districts.

"[ECLC] brought together people from across the district who don't normally interact with each other on a given day. So you have people from the high school and people from elementary schools and the middle school and central office people and we're all together talking. And that's an opportunity you don't get very often at all in a school district. So creating that space and then, you know, giving the guidance, giving the framework for discussion … helping to focus the discussion. That matters too, because it can be easy even if you create that space and that time to get sidetracked by not unimportant issues, but kind of the daily issues, whereas the staff and the ECLC could help you kind of get to that next level. And think about the bigger picture, think about the vision of where you're going in a way that only someone who has a certain level of removal from the day to day can help you do prep." – School administrator from a Cohort 2 district

Building cross-district collaboration was a challenge

Most Cohort 2 participants shared how the development of a strong cross-district network of practitioners has stalled or been limited.

- Educators shared how the pandemic caused almost daily crises in their schools and this made it challenging to attend or be as engaged with ECLC events.

- Participants found it challenging to create or build a sense of community during virtual sessions, especially when the composition of the group would change from offering to offering.

- For most participants, the engagement with educators in other districts was limited to short breakout rooms and dialogue in the chat, and this did not allow them to feel close with or to get to know new participants. This challenge was especially acute amongst returning Cohort 1 educators, who shared how during the first two years of the initiative they had developed a sense of community and familiarity with educators across Essex County, but those relationships were put on hold or weakened over the course of Cohort 2.

"Pre pandemic, I felt as though we were really on a roll, we were really on a roll … and the work we did with ECLC was really the wind in the in those sails. And then the pandemic happened, and that really changed things in the district. So now administrators, everybody, went into crisis mode. And so we lost some of that momentum, and some of the people who were maybe newer to joining … like those connections were a little tentative. So we did this work in a district, but those connections to ECLC beyond the initial group of people, were a little too tentative for them to really endure." - teacher from a cohort 1 district

Impact on educator mindset

overview of the section

In this section we highlight changes in teacher/educator mindset, perspective and beliefs.

What we found

Central to the design of ECLC is a focus on the beliefs, perspectives, and mindsets of the participants. Research has shown that in order to implement sustained shifts in practice, educators must have mindsets that are aligned with the overarching equity goals; mindsets such as growth mindset (vs. a fixed mindset), an asset-based mindset (vs. a deficit mindset), and support for racial awareness (vs. colorblindness).

"Right now we're in the middle of the mindset change, and you know, it never moves fast enough for you, but I think, if I were to step back and look where we're now in March of 2022, I suppose where we were in, say, March of 2019 before we got involved [with ECLC]. I think we've come a long way and I think the mindsets are changing. The mindset is the most important piece because you can try new things, but you have to have that mindset and that commitment among your leaders that all students can learn if we create the right environment for that." – Cohort 2 school administrator
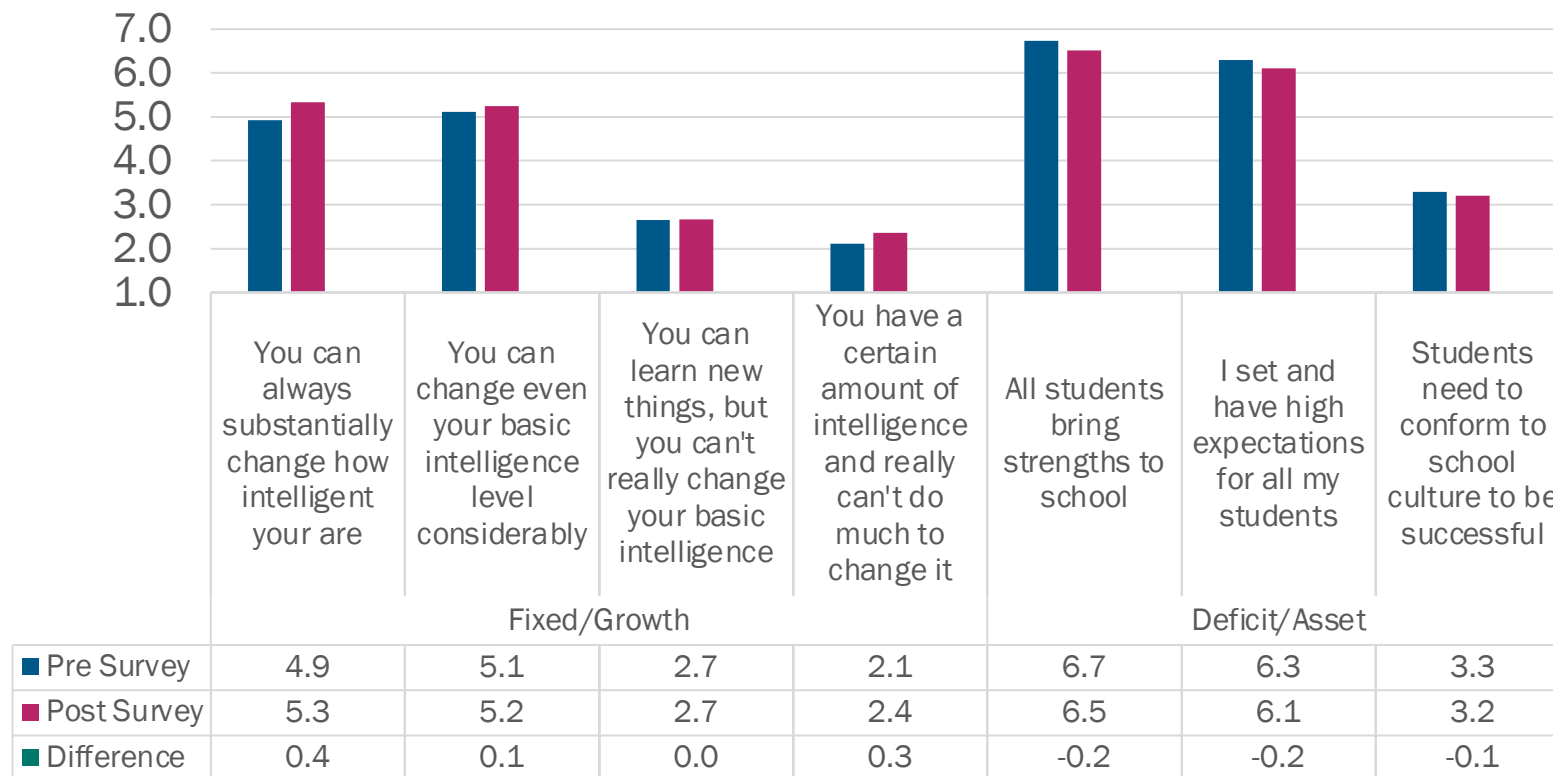
What we found

After two years of participation, there was range in the impact ECLC had on individuals' mindsets, perspectives, and beliefs. Interviews and open-response survey questions highlighted several key areas where educators' beliefs, mindsets, and perspectives have shifted and/or evolved as a results of participating in the ECLC: *a deeper understanding of equity and especially racial equity, viewing students holistically as individuals rather than members of categories, and an increased focus on the social-emotional well-being of students and educators.*

- Responses to the pre-survey indicate that participants enter their involvement with the ECLC with strong equity-minded mindsets including support for growth and asset-based mindsets and support for racial awareness. At the end of their participation in Cohort 2, the post-survey showed similar beliefs.

Pre- and Post-Survey Results

	Fixed/Growth				Deficit/Asset		
	You can always substantially change how intelligent your are	You can change even your basic intelligence level considerably	You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic intelligence	You have a certain amount of intelligence and really can't do much to change it	All students bring strengths to school	I set and have high expectations for all my students	Students need to conform to school culture to be successful
Pre Survey	4.9	5.1	2.7	2.1	6.7	6.3	3.3
Post Survey	5.3	5.2	2.7	2.4	6.5	6.1	3.2
Difference	0.4	0.1	0.0	0.3	-0.2	-0.2	-0.1

(1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Disagree, 4 = Neither Disagree nor Agree, 5 = Somewhat Agree, 6 = Agree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

What we found

For some, the offerings led educators to take on completely new mindsets and perspectives, especially about their own identity and the role of race and structural racism in education. However, for most participants, mindset shifts were more subtle or part of a longer equity journey that began before their participation in the ECLC.

"I am more aware of my biases from my upbringing and lack of world experiences. ECLC has shown me how to educate myself to create a culture in my classroom were all know they are valued. ... it's changed with my students. I think I'm much better ... at recognizing that there's so much I don't know that I don't know about them, and so much that I don't know about myself, and that all of those things that I don't know that I don't know are affecting the work that I do every day with my kids." – Cohort 1 teacher

Evolving understanding of equity

The most common way educators discussed shifts in mindsets, perspectives, and beliefs was an evolving and deeper understanding of race and equity as it relates to their students.
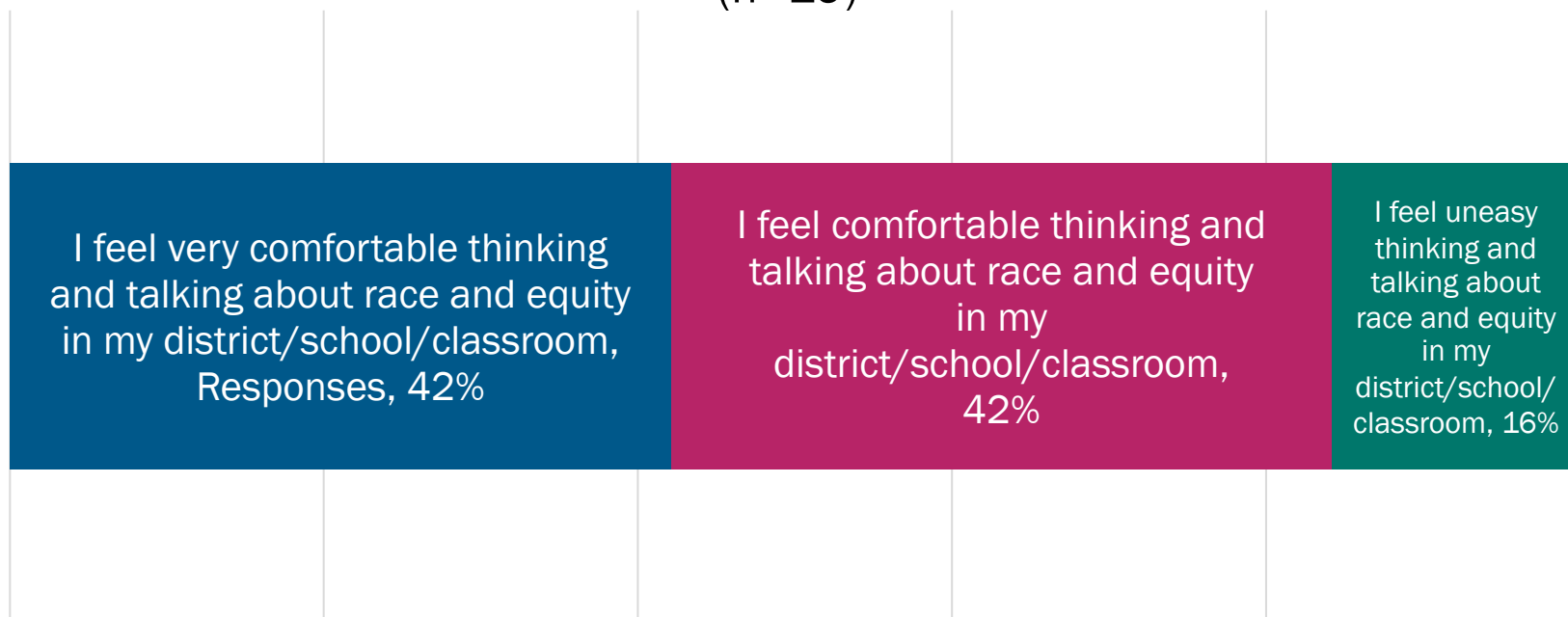
The majority of survey respondents (84 %) shared that they feel comfortable or very comfortable thinking and talking about race and equity.

A survey respondent shared: *"Delving deep into systemic racism, the history, impacts, and current forces keeping these systems in place has been profound in my understanding and empathy for my students and families affected by these systems. I now use this lens when thinking about how I can best support my students/families and use my position to mitigate these challenges."*

Evolving understanding of equity

Having participated in Cohort 2 of the ECLC, please choose from the following responses which most resonates with you:
(n=19)

I feel very comfortable thinking and talking about race and equity in my district/school/classroom, Responses, 42%	I feel comfortable thinking and talking about race and equity in my district/school/classroom, 42%	I feel uneasy thinking and talking about race and equity in my district/school/classroom, 16%

Evolving understanding of equity

The extent of changes to mindsets and beliefs around the importance of race became evident during the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd and subsequent national "reckoning with race".

"They provided [offerings on race] the year before. So, when [the national reckoning with race] all came out, it's like, 'Yes, this is exactly what we needed.' This is exactly what we needed as a country, as a school, as our town that we work in. So, it was really wonderful to be able to have those tools to jump right in. And now our colleagues were paying attention or, you know, 85% of them. So, we had the vocabulary, we had the books that we could leave in the teachers' room, and they pick them up. We were really, really ready. ... And without ECLC ... I would have had to open my eyes just when everybody else was, but I didn't. I had already opened my eyes earlier, so that I was able to guide some of my colleagues that were finally ready it was it was just so great to do that." – teacher from Cohort 1 district

Viewing students as individuals

A common change in perspective was educators shifting how think they about students, moving away from thinking of students in terms of test scores or as part of predetermined categories (e.g., "underperforming students," SWDs, or ELs), and thinking more holistically about their students

- Before this mindset shift, educators said they would focus more on the "lowest performing" students, the small group of students who are having disciplinary issues or failing the state standardized test.

- Instead, educators reflected how through participation in offerings on UDL and culturally responsive teaching they now consider each student's background and specific learning needs, and how to best support and engage each student. Participants reflected that this led to shifting from thinking about what students are doing incorrectly to focusing on what they as educators can be doing differently.

Viewing students as individuals

"It literally ... has shifted my mind from putting children into categories, to looking at just an individual child. And there's really no other way to try to explain that because I have to look at [how] every child's history is different. Every child's culture is different - race, ethnicity, like everything can be different and unique to that one child. And when you combine all those things into one individual, you're getting a unique individual. And so, I think before it was easy to be like oh, these are my children with learning challenges. Oh, these are my behavior kids. Oh, those are my ELLs. And we want to like compartmentalize children to make it a little bit easier to navigate. But when push comes to shove, you really have to just look at the individual child and take all different things into account. But you just need to be able to get to know them as individuals with the lens of being aware of trauma, and being culturally responsive and having an understanding for learning differences, ... that's the biggest shift for me is not just compartmentalizing them or labeling them, but really just having a good understanding of the individual student in front of you." – Cohort 1 teacher

Focus on social and emotional health of students

Prior to participating in the ECLC, many educators prioritized academics and instruction over creating space and structures to attend to the social-emotional well-being of students.

- ECLC offerings as well as the lived experience of supporting students during the pandemic helped educators understand the importance of the social-emotional well-being of students.

- Educators, many for the first-time, began to focus on the importance of their own mental health unpacking trauma and identifying what is your work vs. your job and setting up healthy boundaries.

Areas for growth in mindset development

While the interviews and survey open-responses revealed important growth in teacher mindsets, there are a couple of areas where teachers can still evolve – consistency in asset-based mindset and reflection on teachers' racial identity.

Deficit vs. asset mindset

Participants commonly discussed how they believe they approach their students with a growth and asset-based mindset, a belief confirmed in the surveys, where educators indicated support for an asset-based mindset and supporting a growth mindset.

- However, the several educators continue to use language that indicates they carry a deficit lens for some of their students. The discussion of students still often focuses on students' shortcomings and teachers rarely discussed their students through an asset-based lens.

- This is especially true when teachers discuss working with diverse learners, where educators still focus most often on the needs and deficiencies of students, especially ELs.

Educators unwilling to discuss their own racial and ethnic-identity

Another area of inconsistency in mindset shifts was participants' ability or willingness to discuss their own racial and ethnic identity.

- Among participants, there was a small group of educators who highlighted how the ECLC offerings encouraged them for the first time to reflect on their own racial identity, how their identity impacts how they engage with students and other educators, and how their identity impacts how students engage with them.

- The majority of respondents are still reluctant to talk about their own racial and ethnic identity. This lack of personal reflection is particularly glaring because most ECLC participants are increasingly comfortable talking about the race of their students and discussing the role race/ethnicity has on student experiences in Essex County schools. However, they are less comfortable sharing the ways in which their own race may impact the education of their students.

changes in individual practice

overview of the section

In this section, we highlight some key changes in practice that were implemented by Cohort 2 districts.

"Well, so having attended ECLC I started looking at the curriculum that we have to teach … which was very dry very, it was awful. And so when it came up that we were going to start piloting some literacy programs, I was like I need in on this and so I'm piloting a new literacy program and I'm looking at it in the perspective as an ECLC participant. Do they have equity in there? Do they have a lot of diversity? Is what they're teaching pertinent to the world around us? I would never have been able to do that without the ECLC. The guidance they've given me and especially in this time that we're in, I'm able to navigate, I'm able to step in and suggest without offending." – Cohort 1 teacher

What we found

While there have been clear shifts or evolutions in mindsets, there has been incremental yet important shifts in individual practices. In the post-survey, on average, educators agreed that participating in the ECLC encouraged them to reflect on their practices, helped them identify specific ways to improve practice, and motivated them to do something different in their practice.
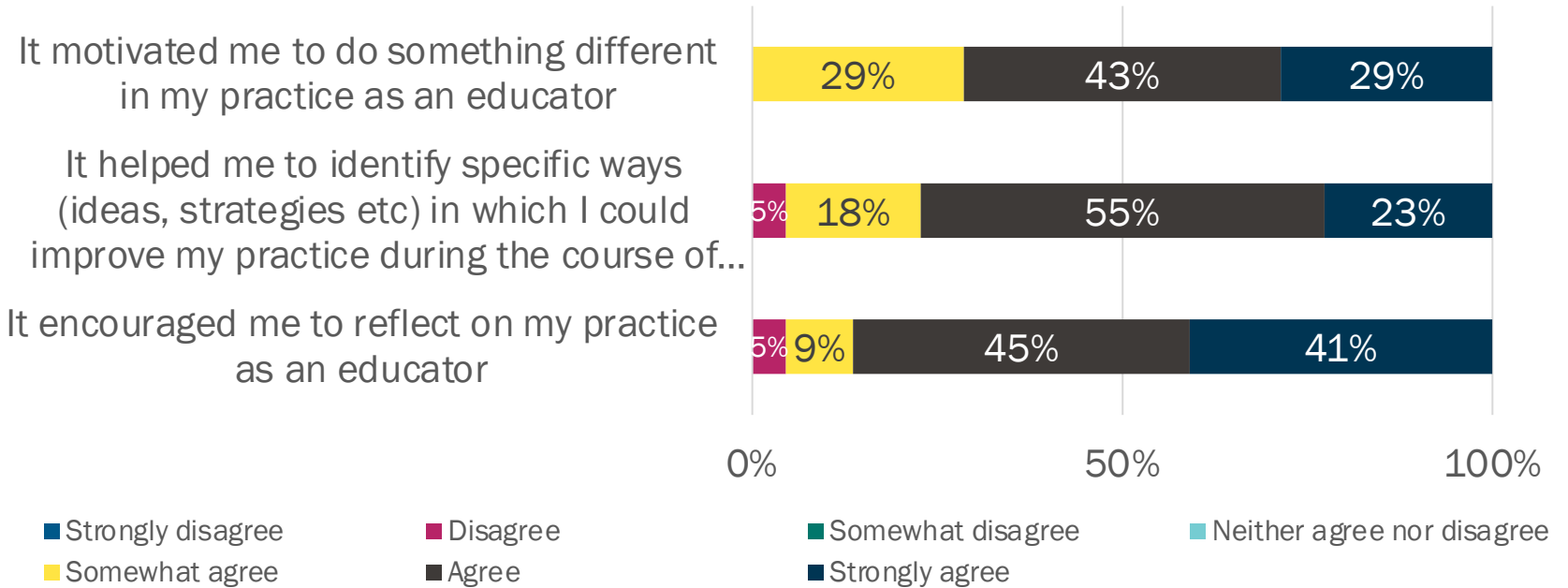
But educators shared only few ways in which their individual practices have been able to change along with the increased reflection and mindset shifts – incorporating discussions of equity and race into curricula, implementing culturally responsive practices, and integrating SEL into everyday instruction.

changes in individual practice
What we found

To what extent do you either agree or disagree with the following statements about participating in any elements of the ECLC (n=22)

It motivated me to do something different in my practice as an educator
29% | 43% | 29%

It helped me to identify specific ways (ideas, strategies etc) in which I could improve my practice during the course of...
5% | 18% | 55% | 23%

It encouraged me to reflect on my practice as an educator
5% | 9% | 45% | 41%

0% 50% 100%

■ Strongly disagree   ■ Disagree   ■ Somewhat disagree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree
■ Somewhat agree   ■ Agree   ■ Strongly agree

Incorporating discussions of equity and race into curriculum and instruction

Educators shared how their increased comfort in thinking and talking about race led to incorporating their learnings into curricula and instructional approaches. Several educators shared how their work with the SEED training and with coaches really opened their eyes to the history of White supremacy in US society and public schools and they applied what they learned into their instruction.

One teacher shared, "*I have focused on redlining in Boston when teaching the civil rights movement and have covered systemic discrimination more directly in my classroom.*"

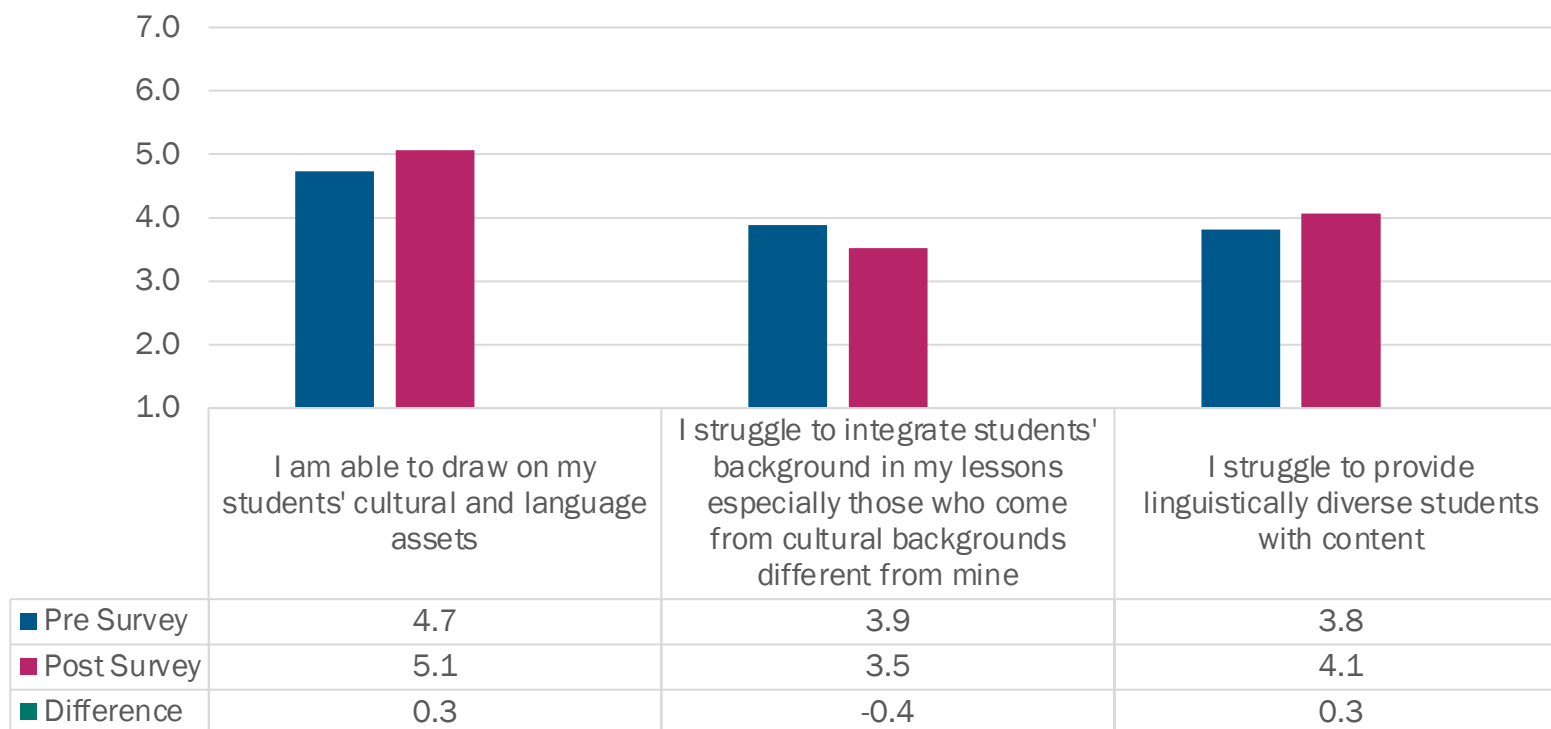# Incorporating discussions of equity and race into curriculum and instruction

The responses to the post-survey supported the increased importation of equity, race, and ethnicity into instruction and classroom materials.

- When asked about their practices, for most topics there were minimal changes from the pre to post survey.

- However, there were some notable exceptions in three questions – the biggest improvements were agreeing to "*I find ways to discuss race/ethnicity and different cultures when designing instruction*" and disagreeing with "*I try not to discuss topics on race or ethnicity out of concern of offending someone*"

Incorporating discussions of equity and race into curriculum and instruction

	I am able to draw on my students' cultural and language assets	I struggle to integrate students' background in my lessons especially those who come from cultural backgrounds different from mine	I struggle to provide linguistically diverse students with content
■ Pre Survey	4.7	3.9	3.8
■ Post Survey	5.1	3.5	4.1
■ Difference	0.3	-0.4	0.3

(1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Disagree, 4 = Neither Disagree nor Agree, 5 = Somewhat Agree, 6 = Agree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

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Culturally responsive practices

Stemming from the shift to looking at their students more holistically, several teachers have started to make changes to curricula and resources to make their classes more culturally responsive.

- Teachers report being more likely to integrate students' background in lessons.

- Examples of creating more culturally responsive classrooms include completely overhauling the books used in a class, piloting a new literacy curriculum, and using the culturally responsive lens as a way to provide feedback for other teachers

Integrating SEL into everyday practice

A clear change in practice stemming from participation in the ECLC is teachers placing a higher emphasis on the social emotional well-being of students and themselves. This includes incorporating SEL into academic curricula, working on developing skills and strategies to help lower student anxiety, beginning the day or classes with a mental health check or mood meter.

"I really have changed the focus more on the social emotional and realizing that you can't meet data benchmarks unless the child in front of you is feeling safe and heard and validated, and that you're there to support them. So I know that I'm less hesitant to worry about my pacing, and what page I'm on in the curriculum, when an opportunity presents itself for them to learn a very important life skill, like being able to take someone else's perspective or validate a kid's feeling. I think, that has shifted tremendously in my, in my everyday practice."

Improved technical quality

Teachers shared how they have begun implementing UDL principles into planning and practice. Participants also described how they have directly implemented tools they learned through ECLC, borrowing protocols and incorporating them into common planning time and professional development. Finally, educators shared how participating in the ECLC has allowed them to be far more collaborative – teachers shared how they are more successful at collaborating with both teachers and administrators. The ECLC provided educators with new structures and protocols for collaborative work that they have implemented in their districts and schools.

"[I'm] able to focus more on collaborating more effectively instead of always being the bull in the China shop so to speak."

"I think my practice has shifted. I'm, I'm definitely more open minded and trying different things in different approaches is, is an easy one. But I really have changed the focus more on the social emotional and realizing that you can't meet data benchmarks unless the child in front of you is feeling safe and heard and validated, and that you're there to support them. So I know that I'm less hesitant to worry about my pacing, and what page I'm on in the curriculum, when an opportunity presents itself for them to learn a very important life skill, like being able to take someone else's perspective or validate a kid's feeling. I think, that has shifted tremendously in my everyday practice." – Cohort 1 teacher

school and district change

overview of the section

This section explores how the ECLC spread beyond participating educators

What we found

Scaling the mindset shifts and changes in individual practices into the work to the entire school or district has proven more challenging due to numerous structural and interpersonal barriers.

- Despite the challenges of spreading the work, the ECLC participants shared several ways in which practices have shifted at the school and district level including incorporating ECLC learning into district and school strategic planning, developing PD based on ECLC learnings, initiating and leading projects and book studies, and leading equity conversations with their peers.

- Participants at all levels in the district are leading the work - the advancement of the ECLC work is being led by district administrators, school administrators, and teachers and in some districts, groups of educators across grades and positions are helping to lead the work.

Incorporating the ECLC learning into strategic planning

Using more formal structures, there are examples of administrators embedding the ECLC learnings into strategic planning.

- At least two districts created long-term plans that involve all teachers increasing the use of UDL principles, MTSS, and SEL into their instruction. .

- These strategic plans borrow from the ECLC Cohort 1 model, where there are different topical teams that gain increased expertise in key areas and then work to share this knowledge with other teachers, often at different grade levels

Leading professional development

One of the central ways that educators are spreading the learnings from ECLC is by designing and leading internal professional development.

- This involves developing professional development sequences, creating Google Classrooms with resources, and incorporating these topics in mentoring programs.
- In some districts, the PD is being designed and delivered by classroom teachers as well as instructional coaches, and administrators.

"…I really felt that UDL would be something that would be important to bring to the fore for all our teachers, because again, that's something that our teachers did not know much or anything about most of them. So, building off of what I had been exposed to in ECLC, I and three teachers in the district put together a whole year sequence of an online course to introduce the whole staff to UDL as an approach to help students be successful during all this learning disruption that happened that year." - Cohort 1 teacher

Book study

ECLC participants in one district shared how they were able to organize and facilitate book studies with educators across the district at all grade levels.

"[This district] is a very unique place. We have a lot of different cultures, but we never really acknowledged them. [This district] is a pretty closed community. So, to come up with lessons and articles for everyone to join in and read it was really good to have minds opened and an open, really free-thinking questions. We did a book group for 'Stamped' and that went over really well. We actually had two book groups for that because we had such a high demand for it. And then we did 'Culturally Responsive Classroom'. We did that two or three times, actually. And we're talking high school, middle school, elementary school. Of course, I've never met the high school or the middle school teachers. So, I had the opportunity to meet them and lead book discussions. It was really good." - Cohort 1 teacher

Informal conversations with teachers

Teachers also took informal approaches to share ECLC learnings including initiating conversations with peers.

"I was fortunate to have two other people in my school [who participated in the ECLC], … two Title One teachers, so, they didn't have a classroom. So, what we would do is they would push into other classrooms and … show other teachers what we were doing, and some teachers didn't want anything to do with that. So, … in the teachers' room, we would mention it and we would have full conversations in front of people that we knew had to hear those full conversations and then other teachers were like, yeah, please come in and do this with me. Please show me how to do this. So, it was really great to have that backing -this was all because of ECLC. They're the ones that showed us how to get it done. There's the one that showed us how to gently approach those around us to make things better. And then my principal started jumping in on these things too. So, it was so our staff meetings and things like that went towards that which was really good."

Examples of district and school change

The areas where participants discussed tangible changes or shifts in their district largely align with the focus areas from Cohort 1 of the ECLC – districts have made progress with an increased focus on equity, SEL, UDL, MTSS, and culturally responsive teaching.

- Respondents share that their districts and schools are exploring new curricula and assessment approaches to ensure they are serving all students. For example, as a means to engage all students and build off of student assets, one district is working with an external organization recommended by ECLC to implement project-based learning.

Examples of district and school change

- An example of spreading ECLC learning on equity to an entire district is a district where participation in ECLC and the SEED trainings led a district administrator to work with an ECLC coach to develop "*a very comprehensive and extensive Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging plan.*" One of the immediate steps from this work is the establishment of a DEIB leadership team, which is comprised of almost all of the administrators in the district and six teachers, and together they are doing a full year of SEED training.

- Stemming from the increased internal collaboration discussed earlier, a common district shift has been more vertical alignment and shared experiences for teachers across grade levels.

Challenges and barriers to school and district change

Participants shared that overall, widespread change has been difficult. They cited several reasons for this: complications stemming from the pandemic, a lack of a clear implementation approach, and lack of support from district or school leadership.

Barrier 1: the pandemic

According to educators, the largest barrier to spreading and implementing changes was COVID and the associated school disruptions.

Participants, especially from Cohort 1 districts, shared how their school and/or district had just begun to implement plans directly linked to the ECLC work when the pandemic hit, causing schools to put all ECLC-related work on the "backburner" while they attended to the immediate needs of students.

The pandemic also cause/led to high staff turnover creating major challenges to consistent implementation.

"Unfortunately, the pandemic continues to hold us as a district in emergency mode... working so hard to survive that little is left for thinking beyond the current moment."

Barrier 2: need for an implementation approach

A substantial barrier to spreading the work is a lack of clear implementation planning. For many participants, the desire for change is there, the mindsets have begun to shift, but they do not know what steps they should be taking to create sustained change in their school or district. The result is either inconsistent implementation or shirting the goals in response to new emergent problems.

"The problem I think, in our roles, is that there are so many great ideas out there, bringing it to the school and implementing an idea is 10 times harder than learning about one and I think that's where a lot of things fall apart.." – Cohort 2 administrator

Barrier 3: district and building support

Critical to the implementation of the ECLC work is district and building leadership, support, and involvement.

- Participants, especially teachers, highlighted the importance of having principal and district leadership involved with the professional learning.

- With the backing and presence of a principal, it is easier to get buy-in from other teachers.

- The successes (e.g. teacher led PD and book clubs) occurred in schools where the principal and/or district administrators had also participated in ECLC. In other settings, participants identified inconsistent leadership as a barrier to implementation.

recommendations

overview of the section

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

Professional development

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

- Overall, participants described the professional development as extremely high-quality, far greater than the PD offerings within their own districts.

- Educators, especially those who participated in Cohort 1, want a chance to get more in-depth with specific topics

Professional learning focused on approaches for the implementation and spreading the work

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

- Growing and spreading ECLC learning continues to be a struggle

- Provide explicit resources and trainings on how to implement the learnings

- Support network to move beyond the "high-fliers" and early adopters

- Personalized district support to help drive the work deeper

Strengthen the network

Partly a product of the remote meetings, educators felt as though they no longer know the other teachers in the ECLC outside their own district.

- Educators want to know what is happening in the other districts, who the other people are in similar roles, and who is working on similar projects/initiatives. Participants also want networking opportunities outside of professional learning opportunities.

- Similarly, some participants asked for more role alike meetings, something that is celebrated by superintendents. One possible group would be for Curriculum and Instruction directors/assistant superintendents.

- Continue to promote ECLC to existing districts and to new districts/ Participants shared that other educators in their school and district are not all aware that they are part of ECLC or that they can attend offerings.

Provide in-person and virtual opportunities to connect

Educators lament the need to move away from in-person events where they are treated like professionals, given a nice lunch, and can really focus on professional learning. Educators acknowledge that they can attend far more offerings through Zoom meetings held after the school day.

- Provide a mix of in-person and virtual offerings to meet the diverse needs of the network

ECLC growth and sustainability

Survey and interview participants uniformly praised ECLC and plan to continue their participation. However, they want to know how the learning community can spread and survive outside of the core group of engaged educators.

- Sustainability of ECLC will require increased cross-district engagement and support, less reliance on Full Frame Communications and the network of coaches and experts.

- The ECLC should continue to build structures for educators to connect throughout Essex County and provide tools and resources for educators to lead the work themselves.

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

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