

ASPIRATIONS INCUBATOR: Interim Evaluation Report

March 2021



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**Language regarding PEAR was updated in November 2021.*



This report was developed for the Lerner Foundation's Aspirations Incubator by the Data Innovation Project, which is part of the Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy at the University of Southern Maine. Portland, Maine, March 2021.

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DIP Research Disclosure Statement

The Data Innovation Project recognizes that the study of the social realm can never be truly neutral and that as applied researchers our specific positionalities in social strata may influence our experience and interpretation of reality as well as our approach to understanding reality. For this reason, we believe it is our responsibility to be transparent about who we are as meaning makers and producers of knowledge. We are a team of educated, middle-class, white women. We may be homogenous in many ways but we are not afraid of dialogue. If you believe we have overlooked a critical perspective or interpretation in our work please tell us and we will strive to address it.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Emanuel & Pauline A. Lerner Foundation's Aspirations Incubator (AI) is a six-year pilot initiative invested in strategic capacity building for six youth development organizations in rural Maine. Grounded in the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, the Aspirations Incubator invests targeted resources to provide long-term, comprehensive relationship-based programming to youth. This structured yet flexible program model aims to increase resiliency and introduce new opportunities to cohorts of young people starting in 7th grade and continuing through high school graduation. To document the potential impact and effectiveness of this unique model, the Lerner Foundation contracted with the Data Innovation Project to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year implementation and outcomes evaluation. This interim report reflects the first three years (September 2017 to August 2020) of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation and details findings related to program implementation and model fidelity, and emergent participant outcomes.

Methods

The Aspirations Incubator evaluation design employs a mixed methods approach that uses qualitative and quantitative methods to understand how the program is implemented and the extent to which students experience positive outcomes while participating. In this three-year interim report six data sources were used: key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, community stakeholders, and mentors; semi-annual site reports; a social-emotional "portrait" of the unique strengths and challenges of young people that can be used to tailor programming developed by the Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR); supplemental student experience surveys after 8th grade; student focus groups; and school data on attendance and academic achievement.

Key Findings

This report compiles data collected during three years of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation. The following represent the observations and outcomes after three years of program implementation.

Program Implementation & Model Fidelity

The six Aspirations Incubator sites have been fairly successful in their implementation and fidelity to the Youth Programming Principles. All sites are making excellent or satisfactory progress on effectively implementing most of the principles. Two principles, Principle 2: Developing a Network of Caring Adults and Peers, and Principle 4: Creating a Community Support Network, have lagged the furthest on their fidelity targets due to challenges with implementation and measurement. In addition, three years of implementing AI programs has prompted many observations and lessons learned about the model and what factors support successful program implementation, some of which have been crystalized in the past year as programs respond to COVID-19. These lessons are outlined as follows:

- **Knowledge Management:** In order to weather the inevitable fluctuations in staffing, organizational leadership, and community partners, organizations must invest in knowledge management practices.
- **Organizational Agility:** Organizational cultures, structures, and policies that allow program managers to quickly adapt and respond to changing circumstances, such as COVID-19, support successful program implementation.

- **It's the Relationships:** The COVID-19 experience cemented the importance of relationship building in the Aspirations Incubator model when program managers were able to seamlessly maintain contact with their students throughout the early months of the pandemic.
- **Bring Parents and Families into the Circle:** Parent engagement has been lifted up by program managers as both a challenge and an opportunity since Year 1. However, the pandemic fostered much deeper connections and levels of support that sites provided to students' families.
- **Program Sustainability:** Sites are ramping up to raise significant funds after Year 6 when the Lerner Foundation grant ends. They have already begun to collaborate with other sites and are eager for deeper support from the Lerner Foundation to aid their development efforts.

Participants and Emerging Outcomes

After three years of programming, the AI sites have served over 250 students from Maine's rural communities. Cohorts are fairly evenly split between male and female participants, with some site variations. The majority of students indicated they were White (80%), followed by more than one race (14%, frequently White and American Indian). Across all cohorts and sites, students presented a number of strength and challenge areas at program initiation (based on self-assessment), averaging four strengths areas and three challenge areas. After participating in the program, students exhibit the following outcomes:

- **Relationships:** The majority of students reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships each year; 93% agreed that the program had helped them to feel connected to their community, and 84% said they have people to talk with when they feel lonely.
- **Resiliency and Social-Emotional Skills:** At least 70% of students consistently reported positive growth on four or more measures of resiliency. The overwhelming majority 8th graders reported that the program helped them learn to express their needs, make concrete plans, stay level-headed, talk to others, and understand their own strengths.
- **Exposure to Diversity:** Almost all 8th graders reported that the program helped them to experience new places and that they accept people who are different; most also said they try new things even when they are not sure about them, and try to understand another person's point of view.
- **Learning, School Engagement, and Aspirations:** Over 70% of students consistently reported experiencing positive growth on measures related to learning and school engagement; in addition, AI students were half as likely to be chronically absent (missing 18 or more days of school in a year) compared with their grade level peers. Among 8th graders, most said it was very true they would finish high school (89%) and have a career (85%), while 61% said it was very true that they would attend college.

Students' qualitative responses consistently showed how they thought they were acquiring new skills, experiencing new things, engaging in self-discovery, and learning new behaviors as a result of the program. In all outcome areas, however, older girls (i.e., those in Cohort 1, or ninth grade) in 2020 were less likely to report positive growth when compared with boys. The most notable differences were in relationships (peer and adult), trust, optimism, perseverance and school bonding. This is consistent with overwhelming evidence that middle school years are a critical time for adolescent girls who begin to exhibit high levels of stress, depression, and related symptoms.

Recommendations

When looking ahead to the next three years, the successes and challenges faced by the AI pilot and the program sites must be framed within the ongoing context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following recommendations should be considered as the AI navigates the fourth year of program implementation.

For AI Organizations and Programs

- **Recommendation 1: Strategically Address Retention & Cohort Sizes.** Programs should take into account the following factors when determining future cohort sizes: staff capacity, potential staff turnover, and what it takes to run three simultaneous cohorts, particularly in terms of informal relationship building and the on-going restrictions related to COVID-19.
- **Recommendation 2: Build Organizational Capacity to Recruit Adult & Peer Mentors.** To meet mentoring capacity expectations within the next three years, organizations need to build a robust volunteer pipeline and infrastructure that program managers can easily access, rather than relying on the AI program managers to achieve this on their own. Some sites have already begun this process.
- **Recommendation 3: Broaden Organizational Integration of the AI Program.** Leadership buy-in and full program integration are key to the success of AI programs. The AI organizations need to fully integrate the Youth Programming Principles into their organizational expectations so that everyone in the organization is familiar with them, the supporting documentation and tools, and how they can and should be applied.
- **Recommendation 4: Deepen Organizational Understanding of Assessment Tools.** Organizations need to ensure program managers have the resources they need to continue using the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) results and more fully integrate these tools into their organizational expectations. For example, examining self-assessment and retrospective data to explore whether students' experiences with the program are growing their strengths, and using that information to tailor programming. In aggregate these tools can also help programs to demonstrate their results over the longer term.
- **Recommendation 5: Build Community Connections to Support Wellbeing.** Organizations and program managers should prioritize building connections with formal care providers in the coming years as the pandemic and its repercussions endure. In addition, programs need to pay close attention to girls' mental wellbeing, and work to identify community supports that can address their specific needs.
- **Recommendation 6: Support Learning on Equity and Inclusion.** Given the social justice protests over the past year, it is likely these topics will emerge within the cohort groups in the coming years. AI sites should proactively examine how their programs are implemented with an eye towards diversity, equity and inclusion, and consider how they will help program staff learn to hold and navigate these potentially challenging conversations within their student groups.

For the Lerner Foundation

- **Recommendation 7: Revisit the Principles and Fidelity Expectations.** The Lerner Foundation should revisit the Youth Programming Principles in terms of how they are put into practice and assessed. If targets are no longer feasible, new expectations should be set. Notably, the principles should emphasize the important role of parents and family in the model.
- **Recommendation 8: Establish Meaningful Benchmarks for Student Success.** The fidelity targets help the AI programs to know where they are in terms of building and implementing their programs but provide little context in terms of achieving student outcomes. In the coming year, the Lerner Foundation should work with the program evaluators, PEAR, Trekkers, and program sites to identify meaningful benchmarks for student outcomes after three years of programming.
- **Recommendation 9: Provide Guidance on Youth Voice and Choice.** While AI programs have successfully engaged in many aspects of youth voice and choice, some aspects of this principle have yet to fully emerge. It could be helpful for the Lerner Foundation to provide additional support. For example, more guidance on approaches or formats tailored to specific age groups, and concrete examples of what power sharing can look like within a program.
- **Recommendation 10: Ramp-Up Coordinated Sustainability Planning.** The AI programs require a substantial financial investment to operate. Sites look to the Lerner Foundation to coordinate efforts to raise funds and awareness to sustain the AI program and help build a unified, cross-site strategy.

Introduction

Middle school students are at an important developmental stage, when stable relationships with non-family supports can help them overcome challenges in their lives and increase engagement with school.¹ Programs that offer middle school students structured exploration and peer interaction, and take advantage of their willingness to try new things, can help them learn more about themselves and how they want to fit into the world around them.² While more than half of all school-aged children in Maine live in rural areas, many rural middle school students lack access to important resources that develop leadership skills and broaden their sense of what is possible. Moreover, the 2019 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey shows that 56% of high school students in Maine did not feel like they mattered to their community and this tended to be greater in more rural counties. And yet, the same survey also finds that protective factors, such as supportive relationships and caring environments, can help students to feel safe and enhance their resiliency.³

In 2016, after six years of making grants to a number of different organizations throughout Maine, and following a year of research, planning, and partnership development, the Emanuel & Pauline A. Lerner Foundation decided to focus its resources on raising the aspirations of middle school students in rural Maine. In 2017, the Lerner Foundation announced the Aspirations Incubator (AI), a six-year pilot initiative to build the capacity of a carefully selected cohort of rural youth development organizations. Aspirations Incubator partners are tasked with developing comprehensive mentoring-based programming for youth starting in grade 7 and continuing through high school graduation, focused on raising aspirations by increasing resiliency in young people and introducing students growing up in rural Maine communities to new opportunities that exist outside the focus of their everyday lives.

The Aspirations Incubator is guided by the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, developed by Trekkers, a youth serving organization based in Rockland, Maine. The Trekkers model is evidence-based and has made a difference in the lives of hundreds of students growing up in the small fishing communities of Midcoast Maine. The Youth Programming Principles, listed below, are unique in their design because they focus on a continuous, long-term mentoring model that spans six years. The Lerner Foundation selected Trekkers to be the model program for the Aspirations Incubator initiative based on its solid record of students who have experienced a greater degree of positive outcomes when compared to their peers, as well as the research literature which supports each of the Youth Programming Principles.

¹ Center for Promise (2015). Don't quit on me: What young people who left school say about the power of relationships. Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance.

² Deschenes, S. N., Arbreton, A., Little, P. M., Herrera, C., Grossman, J. B., & Weiss, H. B. (with Lee, D.). (2010). *Engaging older youth: Program and city-level strategies to support sustained participation in out-of-school time*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

³ Tinkham, K. (2020) *Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth*. Maine Resilience Building Network. Accessed 3/1/2021: <https://maineresilience.org/resources/Documents/MaineResilienceBuildingNetworkCultivatingMatteringforMaineYouthWhitePaper.pdf>

For more information about the MIYHS, please visit: <https://data.mainepublichealth.gov/miyhs/home>

Trekkers' Youth Programming Principles⁴

1. Designing Intentional Program Delivery Systems for Long-Term Engagement
2. Developing a Skilled Network of Caring Adults and Peer Mentors
3. Applying a Comprehensive Approach to Youth Development Strategies
4. Creating a Community Support Network
5. Prioritizing Informal Relationship Building with Youth
6. Expanding Worldviews
7. Embracing Student Voice and Choice
8. Encouraging Civic Responsibility
9. Preparing Students for Success After High School
10. Utilizing Validated Assessment Tools to Promote Social-Emotional Development in Young People

Purpose of this Report

The Lerner Foundation has contracted with the Data Innovation Project (DIP) to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year evaluation of the Aspirations Incubator (AI). This *Interim Evaluation Report* shares the significant themes that emerged from three years of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot program (September 2017 to August 2020).

The multi-year evaluation includes both formative and summative phases and employs a mixed method approach, using both qualitative and quantitative analyses to answer evaluation questions. In addition to monitoring the process of program implementation (including fidelity to the model), the outcomes evaluation employs a longitudinal time-series design with the intent of tracking progress over time. For medium- and long- term outcomes, additional data collection efforts will allow for comparisons to be made to aggregate peer statistics, e.g., school attendance rates, graduation rates or post-secondary initiation.

At the conclusion of Year 3, the AI sites are halfway through the six-year timeline; thus, this report takes a more comprehensive look at the previous three years and engages in more complex analysis than previous reports. However, Year 3 also saw the AI programs grapple with the widespread and profound impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic that has profoundly re-shaped the reality in which schools, programs, families, and communities function. The resulting story that unfolds herein is filled with challenges, but also incorporates examples of innovation and resiliency. Moreover, the onset of COVID-19 and resulting programmatic shifts have brought to the forefront critical aspects of the Youth Programming Principles in stark clarity.

⁴ More information about Trekkers and the Principles can be found on their website: www.trekkers.org

The report reflects information gathered from the following sources: 6 semi-annual site reports;⁵ 78 key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, and community stakeholders; data from two 8th grade surveys (145 responses); three youth focus groups; and, annual self-reported data from a social-emotional “portrait” of the unique strengths and challenges of young people developed by [Partnerships in Education and Resilience \(PEAR\)](#). This third year also provided an opportunity to gather and collect data from participating school districts regarding attendance and academic achievement for participating students compared to their grade level peers. The original evaluation methodology included three site visits that included a youth focus group. The evaluation team was able to conduct one site visit before the COVID-19 lockdown began. In order to maintain the same level of youth voice in the interim report, we conducted two virtual focus groups with the remaining site visit organizations. Qualitative data were coded and analyzed using NVivo software; quantitative data were analyzed using MS Excel and SPSS to produce basic descriptive statistics. More information on the data sources and the analysis methods can be found at the end of this report in Appendix A.

The data collected for this report reflect three years of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation. The report further establishes the baseline for multi-year trends, and creates a benchmark against which future cohorts can be compared. This report also discusses fidelity to the Youth Programming Principles and explores differences observed among the sites. Although the cumulative numbers of participants are growing with each cohort, the observed results should be considered emerging and may not hold up in future years. The first section of the report presents the findings related to program implementation. This is followed by a description of the participants and exploration of emerging participant outcomes. The impact of COVID-19 and programs’ responses are interwoven throughout this report, and highlighted on occasion through sidebar vignettes and observations.

⁵In Year 2, the reporting timeline for the semi-annual reports shifted to better align with the program years (September through August). To transition to the new reporting schedule, one reporting period was extended from six to nine months. Moving forward, reports reflect activities September through February, and March through August.

Program Implementation

This section describes three years of program implementation by detailing findings in three sections: a description of the AI sites; program delivery and fidelity to the Youth Programming Principles; and lessons learned from implementing the model at varied organizations across the state of Maine.

Aspiration Incubator Sites

Although each organization had a background in serving youth and were required to partner with one school district for the application process, there were considerable differences between the AI grantee organizations. These site variations offered both challenges and opportunities when implementing the AI model and its Youth Programming Principles. Seeing the principles applied in several different contexts also helped distill key elements of the intervention for the technical assistance providers at the Lerner Foundation. For a complete list of Aspirations Incubator grantees see Table 1.

Geography: The grantee sites are located throughout the state of Maine, as shown in Figure 1. Most of the sites are in rural areas; two sites, Apex Youth Connection and Old Town-Orono YMCA, are in medium and small suburban areas, respectively, according to the National Center for Education Statistics classification scheme. Many of the AI sites are clustered along the coast with one Downeast site in Cherryfield, Washington County. Interior and northern Maine are less represented in the AI sites. Old Town – Orono YMCA is the most northern site and the University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond is the furthest inland.

Type of lead organization: Of the various site organizations, Chewonki and the University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond are organizations that have a more traditional outdoor experiential education focus with a fee-for-service model. The EdGE Program, which is part of the Maine Seacoast Mission, and the Old Town – Orono YMCA are similar in that they provide free and low-cost afterschool and summer camps to children in their service areas, although EdGE also provided in-school programming. The Game Loft and Apex Youth Connection are smaller community-based organizations. Apex Youth Connection began the Aspirations Incubator program as the Community Bicycle Center, but has since reestablished itself as a youth development organization centered on relationship building.

Staffing: Though the Lerner Foundation recommended sites hire a second program manager near the end of the third program year, several sites implemented different staff strategies throughout the first three years. The Game Loft, whose AI program is called I Know ME, hired a program manager but the two organization co-directors also stayed actively involved in the program implementation. By Year 2 they had also brought in the administrative and program delivery support of two full-time AmeriCorp VISTA volunteers. Chewonki, whose AI program is called Waypoint, felt their program manager would be too challenged by managing three 20-person cohorts simultaneously and opted to hire a second program manager by the end of Year 2. This decision proved particularly fortuitous when their original program manager announced his departure near the end of Year 3. Old Town – Orono YMCA, whose program is called River Runners, on-boarded a second program manager to begin near the start of Year 3. The remaining sites will have a second staff person on-boarded during Year 4.

Cohort size: Sites were expected to work with cohorts of 10-20 students, and chose different target ranges for the size of their cohorts. Two sites aimed for cohort sizes around 10 students, three sites had cohorts in mid-range of 14-17 students, and one site enrolled cohorts of 20 students. Refer to Table 3 for cohort sizes by site.

Table 1. Aspirations Incubator Sites

Site	Program Name	Organization Mission	School Districts	Communities Served
Chewonki	Waypoint	Chewonki is a school and camp based in Wiscasset that inspires transformative growth, teaches appreciation and stewardship of the natural world, and challenges people to build thriving, sustainable communities throughout their lives.	RSU #1	Arrowsic, Bath, Woolwich, Phippsburg, and surrounding communities.
Apex Youth Connection (formerly Community Bicycle Center)	Trek2Connect	Apex Youth Connection leverages the power of human connection to get youth "out there" – aspiring toward the future, persisting through challenges, and exploring the world around them. They offer free excursions and hands-on experiences for youth from 3rd to 12th grade, connecting them with mentors, their community and the great outdoors.	Biddeford School Department	Biddeford
Old Town-Orono YMCA	River Runners	The Old Town-Orono YMCA is a community centered organization that serves all ages by promoting healthy living, nurturing the potential of every individual and family, and fostering social responsibility.	RSU #34	Alton, Bradley and Old Town
The EdGE Program of Maine Seacoast Mission	EdGE-Journey	Through after-school, in-school, and summer programs, EdGE offers children from Gouldsboro to Machias the opportunity to challenge themselves, engage with their communities and the outdoors, and explore college and career options.	SAD #37	Addison, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Harrington, Milbridge
The Game Loft	I Know ME	The Game Loft, based in Belfast, promotes positive youth development through non-electronic games and community involvement.	RSU #3	Brooks, Freedom, Jackson, Knox, Liberty, Monroe, Montville, Thorndike, Troy, Unity, Waldo
University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond	NorthStar	The University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond is dedicated to helping young people reach their fullest potential through affordable hands-on learning in the outdoors, in the classroom, and beyond.	SAD #44	Andover, Bethel, Gilead, Greenwood, Newry, Woodstock




Site Retention

The Lerner Foundation originally invested in 8 program sites across Maine. Since 2017, two programs have withdrawn from the AI bringing the total number of sites to six. Kieve-Wavus Education withdrew from the AI at the start of Year 2 (see more discussion of this in the Year 2 report) and Seeds of Independence withdrew partway through Year 3. While KWE and Seeds were different in many regards, and the specific circumstances surrounding their withdrawal from the AI were unique, one thread stands out: in both instances, organizational leadership buy-in began to decrease over time. In the case of KWE, this was exacerbated by the well-established history of the existing programming. This observation becomes strong when contrasted with other AI sites that faced programmatic challenges. The Game Loft and Apex Youth Connection, both of which are smaller organizations, faced organizational transitions unrelated to the AI during the second and third years of the project. However, top-level leadership at both organizations were deeply committed to the success of the AI program at their sites, and thus prioritized remaining part of the AI pilot.


Working Towards the Principles


In the following section, we assess the extent to which sites have established and maintained fidelity to the Youth Programming Principles. At the outset of the AI initiative, the Lerner Foundation and the Trekkers Training Institute worked to develop a framework to assess how sites were designing and implementing their programs in accordance with the Youth Programming Principles. Quantitative target measures for each principle were developed with input from the Data Innovation Project to guide the assessment process and give sites clear benchmarks and time frames. The Fidelity Framework can be found in Appendix B of this report.

In each section we present the fidelity target, target icon (refer to Table 2 for the icon legend), and briefly describe the observed progress towards the goals. After which, we provide a more nuanced, narrative discussion of each key programmatic component.

Table 2. Fidelity Target Icon Legend	
	Most or all of the sites met the target
	About half of the sites met the target
	Few or none of the sites met the target

Long-term Program Design (Recruitment, Enrollment and Retention) (Principle 1)

 **Target: The AI program model is fully operational with 6 cohorts of students by 2022.**
Each of the six sites has enrolled Cohort 1, Cohort 2, and Cohort 3. However, one site had to disband their Cohort 1 due to staff turnover and low student engagement.

 **Target: The AI programs will maintain a student retention rate of 75% by 2022.**
Accounting for both withdrawn and partially active students, and students who joined partway through the programming year:

- Cohort 1: Four out of five* sites meet the target
- Cohort 2: Three out of six sites meet the target
- Cohort 3: All six sites meet the target

**Trek2Connect disbanded their Cohort 1*

Long-term engagement is central to the AI program model. Program sites are expected to work with cohorts of 10-20 students each year, starting in 7th grade and progressing through high school graduation. This means that a student who starts in 7th grade would stay in the program for six years. It also means that sites have been adding a new cohort of 7th graders each year since 2017. By the 2019-2020 program year, each site was expected to be supporting three cohorts of students. Most sites typically begin recruiting a new cohort in the fall, select participants by December, and begin programming by mid-January/February.

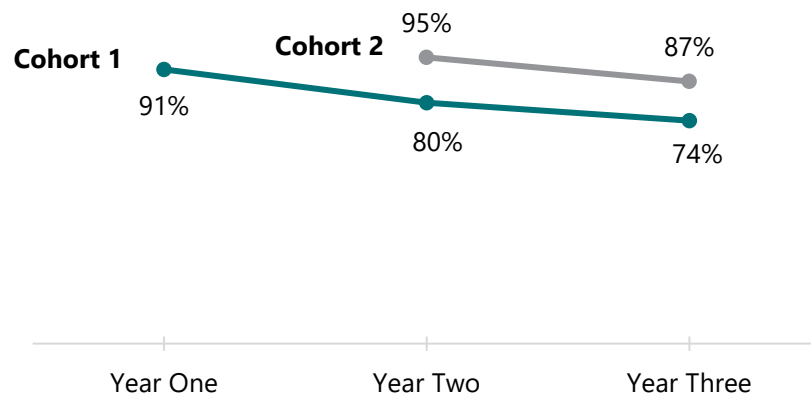
Recruitment & Enrollment

Recruitment was a strong focus in earlier program years as program managers got their bearings and worked out the best ways to reach potential program participants. For the program managers who had completed their Year 3 recruitment prior to when the COVID-19 lockdowns began in March 2020, they had a fairly easy recruitment process. Several shared how they had changed their strategies based on earlier lessons – such as relying on teachers for student recommendations or meeting face-to-face with parents in discuss the program – and they had greater recruitment success as a result. One site was completing their recruitment efforts in March 2020 and as a result, it took considerably more time to fully enroll the new cohort due to the additional challenge of getting families to accurately complete their enrollment paperwork.

Retention

Three years into the program, most sites and cohorts are meeting the fidelity target of maintaining a 75% retention rate (Table 3). When looking at the total retention rate by cohort and year, we see that rates do decrease year-to-year and only fall as low as 74% for Cohort 1 (Figure 2). Both Cohort 1 and 2 experienced greater losses from Year 2 to Year 3. These additional losses in students can be mostly attributed to the upheaval of COVID-19. Program managers described numerous situations that disrupted their students’ ability to stay enrolled - student’s families having to move outside of the program’s service region, students leaving the program because they or a family member were high risk, or students switching to homeschooling and in turn leaving the program.

Figure 2. Overall Retention Rates, by Cohort and Year



If the cohorts, particularly Cohort 1, continue on the current trend, there is a risk that retention could become more of a concern in the years to come. Although not pictured, another aspect of student retention is partial engagement. This is when a student does not participate in AI core programming for the majority of a reporting period, but continues to be connected with the program (typically through outside program contact, support, or peripheral activities) but they intend to participate in core programming activities in the future. In 2020, many programs had more students than usual switch to a partially active enrollment status which was likely due to the disruptions of COVID and shifting definitions of “core programming” since programs switched to mostly remote engagement.

Program managers have also expressed concern about keeping students engaged through the COVID-19 pandemic while many of the perks or “carrots” of their programs, such as trips and unique experiences, are on hold. The program managers were impressively successful in maintaining contact with their students after the pandemic hit, but will they be able to build such resilient bonds with the new students entering their programs? Some program managers, organizational leadership, and school personnel shared concerns around how to successfully recruit and build a cohesive cohort when it must be done fully or mostly remote. In terms of evaluating the success of this model over the six years, it will be challenging if any more students are lost from the first cohorts.

Table 3. Program Flow at the end of Year 3, by Cohort and Site

	Initial Cohort	Joined After Initial Cohort Began	Withdrew	Retention
Cohort 1				
I Know ME	10	0	0	100%
Journey	15	0	1	93%
NorthStar	14	2	2	88%
River Runners	17	7	2	92%
Trek2Connect*	-	-	-	-
Waypoint	20	3	12	48%
Total	86	15	26	74%
Cohort 2				
I Know ME	10	2	1	92%
Journey	17	0	2	88%
NorthStar	13	2	1	93%
River Runners	18	1	0	100%
Trek2Connect	10	3	5	62%
Waypoint	20	2	4	82%
Total	88	10	13	87%
Cohort 3				
I Know ME	11	0	0	100%
Journey	13	0	0	100%
NorthStar	8	1	0	100%
River Runners	21	0	2	90%
Trek2Connect	10	0	2	80%
Waypoint	20	0	0	100%
Total	83	1	4	95%

Note: Retention rates reflect the total number of withdrawn students divided by the total number of enrolled students (initial cohort plus newly joined).

**Trek2Connect disbanded their Cohort 1.*

Developing a Network of Caring Adults and Peer Mentors (Principle 2)



Target: The AI program model maintains a 3 to 1 student to mentor ratio (includes adult and peer mentors) by 2021-2022.

None of the sites are currently on track to meet this target.

For the past three years, each site has struggled with aspects of adult and peer mentor recruitment and retention. This varied somewhat by site where some sites had better success with recruiting and engaging adult mentors and other sites had more success with peer mentors. Program managers and their organizational leadership have been highly aware of their strengths and challenges in this arena and each year outlined new approaches to improve their strategies. For example, one program recognized a lack of qualified adults in their service region and has designed a whole new mentorship program that draws on their organization’s extensive alumni network of college students and graduates. Gains made in earlier years were, of course, challenged by COVID-19, and sites that relied on older adults and retirees, in particular, saw their engagement drop off due to either health concerns or technical challenges with the new online platforms. Similarly, program managers were often responding to student crises in the early days of the pandemic, not to mention their own personal and professional challenges, and thus did not always have the capacity to coordinate the connection between their mentors and students.

Adult recruitment has been much easier for me. The only issue with adult volunteers is most are not able to mentor the entire six years.”

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2018

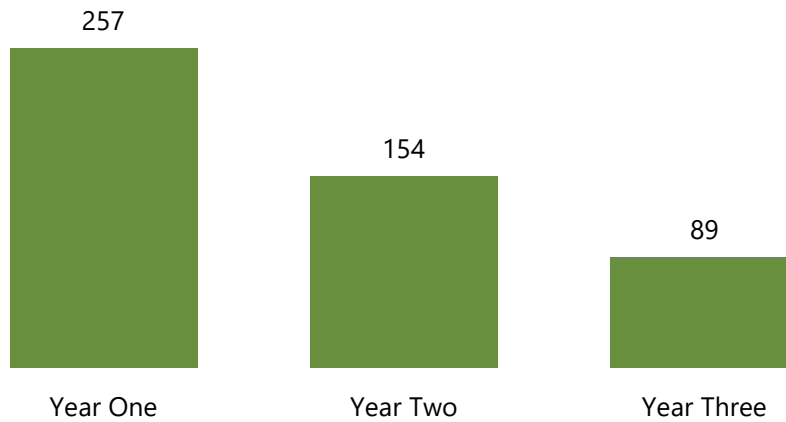
The progression of total volunteer engagement (adult mentors, peer mentors, and other adult volunteers), displayed in Figure 3, follows a pattern one would expect - that sites cast a wide net at the outset of the program and then a smaller, more consistent group of volunteers sustained through the years. However, each of these sites have also been adding one additional cohort of students each year, which indicates that sites are not recruiting mentors at the same rate that they are adding new students. It’s important to also note though that the substantially low numbers in Year 3 are likely related to COVID-19 for the reasons mentioned earlier.

DEFINITIONS

Adult Mentor: A person, 20 years of age or older, who is committed to building a caring relationship with individual students or with the overall cohort for at least 3 months of any given program year.

Peer Mentor: A person, no older than 20 years of age, who is committed to building a caring relationship with individual students or with the overall cohort for at least 3 months of any given program year.

Figure 3. Total Number of Program Volunteers* Each Year



**Includes adult volunteers, adult mentors, and peer mentors.*

Managing volunteers is time consuming and program managers have also expressed concerns about how to balance this expectation with other aspects of the program. One site articulated this tension, “Another challenge is attempting to keep the 3:1 ratio that Lerner would like. It’s important to “build your bench” and have a long list of skilled volunteers worth calling on. That being said, it’s difficult to manage volunteers to the requisite degree while simultaneously supporting over 30 students and families.” Potential volunteers have also been hesitant about the time commitment, which is an added challenge when students respond more positively to consistent mentors.

To further complicate matters, there are some sites that do not meet the fidelity target of a 3:1 student to mentor ratio but have maintained a small number of mentors over the course of years. In some of these cases about 2 mentors have spent upwards of three years with one cohort (around 12-14 students). The question then is: if a cohort has a lasting connection with ~2 mentors over the course of several years is that still in keeping with the spirit of this principle, even if they are not meeting the 3:1 target? In the coming years, this is an area to explore further with sites, mentors and youth participants.

Creating a Community Support Network (Principle 4)



Target: Key AI Program Staff have routine (once per year) contact with at least one member of each community sector to help meet the needs of students by 2019-2020.

No sites met with members of each of the 12 community sectors. Five sites connected with six or more community sectors.

Although none of the sites met the target metric for this principle, the substantial disruptions of COVID-19 illustrated the power of these community connections to activate and quickly respond to the needs of AI students and their families. In this response, sites strengthened existing connections and forged new relationships with local organizations (Figure 4). The following are some examples of the community support networks in action.

- Strengthening linkages to an existing food pantry and community resource counselor which are part of the host organization
- Establishing monthly check-ins with school leadership and guidance counselors
- Connecting with an outside food pantry and making regular food deliveries to families
- Coordinating with outside organizations to get emergency assistance to families
- Helping to connect families/students to behavioral health services, either through the school or independently
- Connecting with city government to get resources to support families experiencing food insecurity or internet issues

Since the outset, sites have been coached to think proactively, rather than reactively, around connecting with organizations. It is unclear though, the extent to which these newer partnerships had their groundwork laid pre-COVID. Nevertheless, the sites activated their connections and community base to support their students. It is important to note that program managers were also tapped by schools to help reconnect with students who were disengaged during the early throes of remote learning. Some program managers said they had to be cautious when negotiating these requests, however, because they did not want to appear like they were policing students on behalf of the schools. It was critical to keep that established trust intact.

“It is a lot different than years prior. I had been in contact with a ton of agencies, planning activities and events...but then COVID hit and we could not travel or even be together. Instead, the school, and school counselors, YMCA USA,... and law enforcement, were the agencies that we interacted with most.”

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2020

“Honestly, the program has helped me so much. First of all, someone’s always there if you need help.”

STUDENT, 2020

Figure 4. Number of Sites Reporting Outreach to Community Partners in Year Three, by Type



Prioritizing Informal Relationship Building (Principle 5)



Target: The Program Manager spends at least 20% of their time interacting with students outside of core programming (informal relationship building + peripheral programming) by 2018-2019.

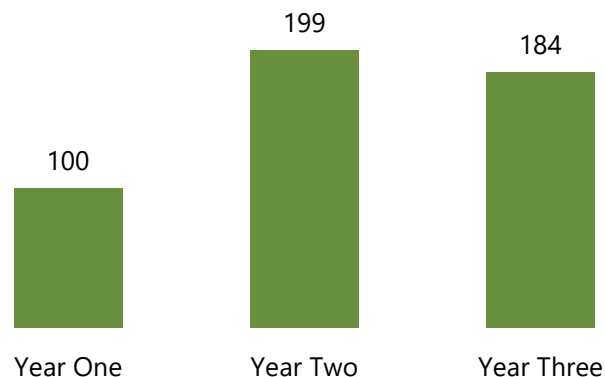
Five out of six sites spent at least 20% of their time interacting with students outside of regular programming.

Informal relationship building (IRB) centers on interacting with young people outside of regular scheduled programming, and maintaining those relationships even when core programs are not in session. In Year 1, sites spent an average of 100 hours per cohort, by Year 2 this was up to an average of 199 hours, and in Year 3 the average declined slightly to 184 hours (Figure 5). This trend reflects results from prior annual evaluations, which found program managers initially struggled to incorporate informal relationship building into their program delivery. This was due in part to some organizations needing to amend policies and establish new risk management guidelines to accommodate this significant departure from typical youth programming. To support IRB time some organizations only needed to expand their general liability insurance while others had to acquire special exemption from their parent organizations' policies that specifically prohibited an adult being alone with a minor.

“That’s (IRB) been against policy for us for safety reasons. As we got into this we realized that isn’t going to fly. [Our program manager] very often drives kids to events or out for hot chocolate or shopping and that’s really, really important time. We made a modification and got an exception to the policy up at the [system-level of the organization].”

SITE LEADERSHIP, 2019

Figure 5. Annual Average Number of Informal Relationship Building Hours per Cohort and Site



These averages, however, smooth out some dramatic site differences in how IRB and peripheral programming hours were allocated. The differences became more apparent in Year 3. In 2018, the last time a fidelity review was completed, the site with the highest proportion of staff time spent with students outside of core programming was 44%, and the lowest was 11%. By 2020, the highest was 70% and the lowest was 11%.

The observed differences in peripheral programming and IRB time can be explained by a number of factors. First, these proportions are calculated to account for staff's Full-Time Equivalency (FTE), so sites with more than one program manager will typically have small proportions when compared to sites with one program manager attending to three cohorts. Second, when COVID-19 hit, some program managers pivoted to almost exclusively connecting with students one-on-one and other sites all but ceased their IRB efforts and put more focus into maintaining their core programming. These differences in strategy that program managers described in their interviews and semi-annual reports are largely reflected in the breakdown of staff time they report, though some questions still remain.

"Some of the kids just need 10 minutes to complain about something and they are fine. That a few short check-ins can be fine it doesn't need to be an hour long coffee to build those relationships."

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2019

"IRB has struggled. We have to make the switch from going to athletic events, meeting for coffee, or different outings, to switch to zoom and do everything virtually. It is successful somewhat, but it is easier for kids to ignore us because we cannot see them face-to-face in school."

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2020

Applying a Comprehensive Approach to Youth Development (Principles 3 & 10)



Target: Each aspect of the comprehensive approach is present and observable in the program model by 2020-2021.

- **Activities designed for each cohort based on aggregate-level data from the HSA**
- **Targeted, holistic youth development methods based on the Clover Model**

All sites described using the HSA to design cohort-based activities, and three sites also developed targeted strategies for individual students based on the Clover Model.



Target: At least 90% of students participate in the HSA each year.

In Year 3, 94% of the students participated in the HSA.



Target: Program Managers participate in at least 2 HSA coaching sessions per year, starting in 2018-2019.

Each Program Manager has participated in at least 2 HSA coaching sessions in Year 2 and Year 3.



Target: Each aspect of promoting social-emotional development is present and observable in the implementation of the program model by 2020-2021.

Four out of six sites are at expectation or exceeding expectation for promoting social-emotional development in their program implementation.

Since the program began in 2017, sites and program managers have been critical to implementing the Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR)'s Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) and HSA-RSC (see box for more information). Getting students to complete two long questionnaires a year is no small feat and program managers handled challenging deployments and changing protocols with aplomb. Of course getting the data is only the first step; the purpose of these tools is to use them to design targeted programming for cohorts and individual students. Program managers have been slower to apply the results of the HSA to their programming. Like any tool it can take time to learn its efficacy. For the HSA in particular, there was also a learning curve to acquire the data literacy skills necessary to interpret and apply the results. Program managers have worked to improve their incorporation of the HSA and all have participated in additional technical assistance sessions.

"We looked through the HSA and saw trends on how their lives changed due to COVID. I guess just trying to find where their challenges are. Especially the ones that hit high on those challenges. We mark those students as red flags so we can keep a closer eye on those students and we create specific activities with them in mind."

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2020

In our review of the semi-annual report and key informant interviews, however, we found fewer sites described examples of utilizing the HSA to develop targeted strategies for individual students based on the Clover Model than in 2018. All sites demonstrated thinking holistically about their cohorts using the HSA data, which may be a function of capacity. Finding the time to develop and implement individual growth plans for three cohorts worth of students may be challenging while juggling other key aspects of program delivery.

WHAT IS PEAR?

Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR) connects educational innovation, youth development, and child and adolescent mental health, bridging research and practice so that young people learn, dream, and thrive. As recognized thought leaders in social and emotional development, PEAR works with schools and school districts throughout the United States, national youth-serving organizations, funders, and innovators in informal learning and STEM fields.

Dr. Gil Noam, PEAR's Chair, developed the **Clover Model** as a framework to help educators understand human developmental needs. It highlights four essential elements that people of all ages need to thrive, learn, and develop: Active Engagement, Assertiveness, Belonging, and Reflection. By identifying the basic needs that individual youth have in these areas, programs can be designed to intentionally meet those needs and nourish strengths.

PEAR's **Holistic Student Assessment (HSA)** is designed to be used in combination with the Clover Model (see Appendix E). The HSA provides a social-emotional "portrait" of the unique strengths and challenges of each young person that can be used to tailor programming.

The Aspiration Incubator relies on these tools to inform its work, particularly around providing a comprehensive approach to youth programming strengths and needs. For more information, visit PEAR at: <https://www.pearinc.org/>

Expanding Worldviews, Civic Responsibility and Preparing for Success (Principles 6, 8, & 9)



Target: Each aspect of experiential learning is present and observable in the AI program model by 2019-2020.

- Five sites engaged students in outdoor excursions
- Six sites engaged students in arts-related activities
- Six sites engaged students in cultural activities.



Target: Each aspect of civic responsibility is present and observable in the AI program model by 2019-2020.

- Four sites engaged students in volunteering and/or service learning activities.
- Four sites engaged in advocacy work.



Target: Each aspect of preparing students for success is present and observable in the AI program model by 2019-2020.

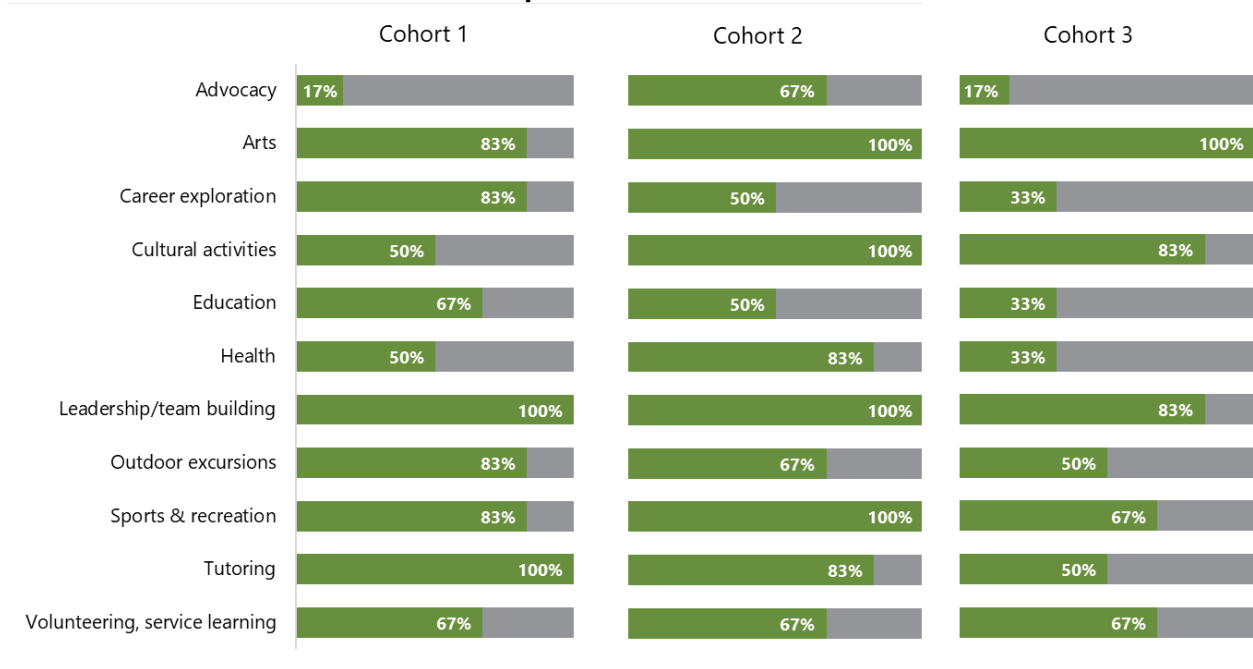
- Five sites engaged students in career exploration.
- Four sites engaged students in education and/or training programs.
- Six sites engaged students in leadership development and team-building activities.

Although each target has not been met by each site this year, as is reflected in the semi-annual reports, all sites are still considered on track for these principles. This is true, in part, because many sites have developed program sequencing where students move through a program in a particular progression. To this end, it is not always appropriate for each cohort to do each activity each year. For example, many sites focus more on leadership development and team building activities in 7th grade when they are trying to establish a cohesive cohort of students and in turn spend less time on activities like career exploration, health, hygiene, and human development, and advocacy work (Figure 6).

"I love the camping trips."

STUDENT 2020

Figure 6. Percent of Sites Who Engaged in Key AI Activity Categories by Cohort: Unduplicated Year 3 Counts



The impacts of COVID-19 are also seen in these activity categories. In past years, all sites and cohorts did at least some kind of outdoor excursion and sport/recreational activity, and fewer sites did tutoring or arts-based activities. Due to the limitations of virtual cohort programming, sites turned to the arts – visual and culinary - to keep students engaged. Similarly, as students struggled to shift to remote learning, all sites supported at least some of their cohorts through tutoring.

“It (the program) has affected me in a good way because it has helped me focus on my careers, and we have had a lot of fun.”

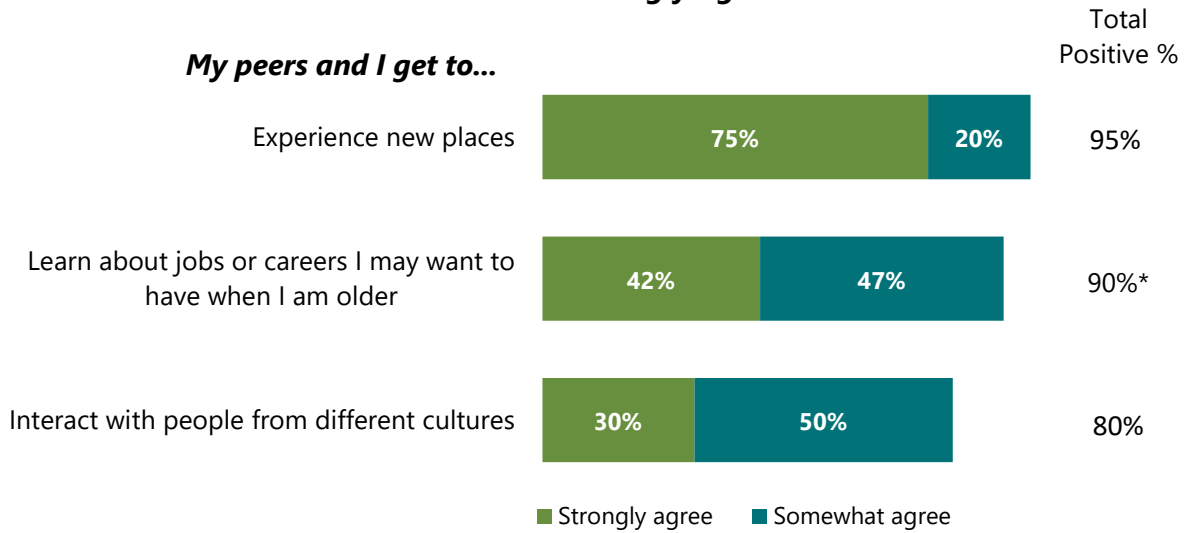
8th GRADER, 2020

Ultimately, these shifts in programming have not impacted what students report about their experiences. We now have two years of 8th grade surveys, and although there were slight decreases in this year’s 8th grade surveys, the aggregate percentages have maintained from last year. Overall, 95% of 8th graders agreed (75% strongly agreed; 20% somewhat agreed) that the program helped them to experience new places, 90% agreed (42% strongly agreed; 47% somewhat agreed) they have learned about jobs or careers they may want in the future, and 80% agreed (30% strongly agreed; 50% somewhat agreed) that they interacted with people from different cultures (Figure 7).

“The main one is pushing them to do things they normally would not do – comfort levels. We did a hike up to Bald Pates. Five or six kids came (a lot did not). One kid complained the whole time. We didn’t finish but he hiked a lot more than he expected to – that is what I’m pleased to see. Experiences beyond comfort and that they wouldn’t have otherwise...that’s the growth.”

ADULT MENTOR, 2020

Figure 7. Percent of 8th Grade Students Who 'Somewhat or Strongly Agreed'



**Total percent inconsistent due to rounding*

Indeed, numerous survey respondents shared feedback about how the program had allowed them to experience new things and what that has done for their worldview. One student wrote, "It affected me because I learned about new things and I got to do some really cool and fun things that I wouldn't be able to do if I wasn't in [the program]." One peer mentor also reiterated how enjoyable it is to get to experience new things and travel further afield through the program; "...the furthest place we have been is Acadia. I really enjoyed that and I think all the kids enjoyed that too. We get to go somewhere we probably won't get to go back to. I think if we could go to places like that that are further away that would be fun."

"It has made me get out of my comfort zone, talk to new people go to new places and learn about myself and where I'm from"

STUDENT, 2020

Enhancing Youth Voice (Principle 7)



Target: Each aspect of student voice and choice is present and observable in the AI program model by 2019-2020.

- **Turning over parts of the educational process to students**
- **Letting students design elements of the program**
- **Allowing students to create the policies that govern the program**

One site had all three aspects of student voice and choice present in their program, three sites had two aspects present, and two sites had one aspect present in their program.

Over the course of three years, sites' ability to implement each aspect of the student voice and choice principle has lagged behind most other principles. We observed that all sites were able to immediately employ more decision-sharing (vs. power-sharing) forms of student choice, such as letting students pick meals, decide on where to go for a trip, or what kinds of activities to do. A couple of sites also had their students determine the policies that would govern the program. However, we found the fewest examples of students taking over parts of the educational process. These observed differences in the components of voice and choice were also reflected in the 8th grade survey (Figure 8). The majority of students, 92%, said they got to make decisions about activities and meals in their program (56% strongly agree; 32% somewhat agreed). Ninety-two percent said they lead some activities (38% strongly agreed; 54% somewhat agreed).

Similar to the distribution of program activities across cohorts, it is important to note that the more transformational forms of student voice and choice where staff share power with students, such as taking over parts of the educational process, creating polices to govern the group, were more often reported in later years. This is likely related to how sites have sequenced students' progression through their programs since some sites may have chosen to provide these greater levels of agency to their older students. Several program managers have mentioned that cohorts take a while to get the hang of consensus-based decision making, for example, which could mean cohorts cannot effectively apply the method until later in the program.

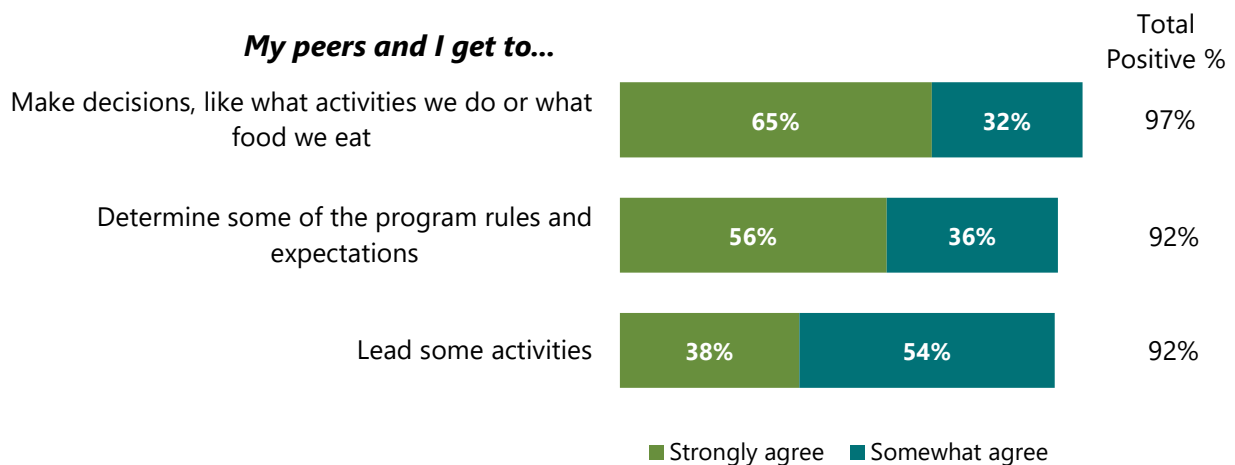
"Sometimes for bigger decisions [our program manager] makes us reach a consensus and if we don't all agree we have to talk it out until some kind of compromise can be made."

STUDENT, 2020

"I would say when just like, each kid gets their own piece of mind. If we went camping somewhere and we all would have to agree on it. What I like about [the program] is everyone gets a say in what we do. We all have to agree on stuff."

PEER MENTOR, 2020

Figure 8. Percent of 8th Grade Students Self-reported Voice and Choice, 'Somewhat or Strongly Agree'



We will look to the following years to see how much the expression of this principle might develop as students mature and program managers become more confident in their ability to hand aspects of the program over. Conversely, it is also unclear how these practices have survived remote programming and how they might continue if remote programming must continue into the next few years.

Lessons Learned

This section compiles lessons learned from three years of program implementation that remain relevant and critical to program success. We have also incorporated implementation insights that were cemented through the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these themes had been observed in prior years but the pandemic gave them new meaning and importance.

Knowledge Management

Organizational knowledge management continues to be a salient takeaway after three years of program implementation. Each site had experienced some amount of organizational disruption and/or staff transitions before COVID-19, and by Year 4 every site will have added a second program manager. These organizational realities underline how critical it is for organizations to integrate their AI program with the broader organization. Organizations have been coached by the Lerner Foundation to establish better knowledge management through a number of strategies: multiple staff well-versed in the youth programming principles as well as the unique systems and policies their organization established to support the model; information and data management systems that are tailored to reflect key features of the Aspirations Incubator model; and processes for orienting new staff to the AI program.

Program Sustainability

Discussions of sustainability emerged more frequently with each year of the program. However, development and sustainability came up less often in Year 3 because the turmoil of COVID-19 dominated our conversations with staff and leadership. Of the site leadership who did address this topic, their comments reflected feedback from prior years. They are ramping up to raise significant funds after Year 6 when the Lerner Foundation grant ends. One site is currently working to apply for a large federal grant through the USDA. Some sites have been continuously applying to grant funding for their youth development work and then squirreling away what they are able to acquire for the later date.

Sites have also expressed a desire to work collaboratively with other sites to go after funding together. They also look to the Lerner Foundation for support in courting other possible funders, connecting sites to development consultants, crafting individual sustainability plans, and communicating and marketing the successes of the program. Several site leadership also said reports like these are valuable in these efforts.

"This is a different kind of relationship than I have ever had with a funder, and I really appreciate it, but this all comes unraveled if there is not some kind of big statewide plan for sustainability."

SITE LEADERSHIP, 2020

Insights from COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the AI programs, their host sites, their school partners, this program evaluation, and most critically, the AI students and their families. Such an upheaval may have lasting impacts on these programs and their students. Yet the surprise of this unforeseen moment is how it has rendered valuable insights about the program and its model. These findings are described in the next section.

It's the Relationships

The COVID-19 experience has cemented the importance of relationship building in the AI model. Throughout the course of the first three years, there were many signs that program managers and organizational leadership were believing more and more in the efficacy of relationship building. COVID-19 solidified the power of the relationships program managers had established with their students and the relationships students had developed with each other.

“Relationships are what move the needle for kids; it’s not the activity. The activity is just the vehicle to build the relationships, not the other way around.”

SITE LEADERSHIP, 2020

“I think the relationships that were formed prior to the building closures really allowed the students to continue their relationship with [the Program Manager] during crisis schooling. I think it speaks to the relationships she built prior to the building closures. And by the same token it has facilitated their return to schooling here in the fall.”

SCHOOL GUIDANCE DIRECTOR, 2020

This contrast was particularly visible to organizations that had to shutter whole programs within their organizations because their connection to youth was through traditional avenues like afterschool programming and school-sponsored field trips. One organizational leader explained, “Right away we (the organization) figured out ways to pivot and reach youth virtually, but [our AI program] was way out ahead; those relationships aren’t dependent on activities or being in-person. So that was one good outcome that forced us to look at our other programming areas and figure out ways to replicate that.” As a result, this organization is trying to weave relationship building into what had predominantly been a focus in outdoor adventure and STEM because they “realized, in a theoretical and philosophical standpoint, those activities are only as good as the mentorship relationship that results.”

Bring Parents and Families into the Circle

The call to engage parents/caregivers shows up in only one of the Youth Programming Principles, yet we consistently saw in the first three years of implementation and through the COVID-19 pandemic, that parents, families, and other caregivers have a greater role to play in the program. One program manager describes this realization, "A learned lesson during my time at [AI program] was the importance of building relationships with the parents. The more they know about the program and myself, the more buy-in they have in communicating to and encouraging their youth." For these reasons, Aspirations Incubator may want to consider elevating parent engagement to a standalone principle.

"[A] big success was being able to actually sit down and have conversations with the kid, if they could be there, but really the parents. The more personal interaction. There was one time when [another staff person] and I sat down and had lunch with one of the parents and told her about the program. It is a lot easier to tell them about the program face-to-face than over the phone."

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2020

Based on insights provided by program managers, parents also appear to be key in the recruitment process. Several sites have noted that students have a hard time grappling with the concept of a six-year program and parents can be a better gauge for a student's likelihood to stick with the program over time. Similarly, there are now numerous examples of how the programs can be as much of a resource for the family as it is for the child. These stories of how AI programs activated their networks of caring adults to support families could be used in the marketing of the program to parents.

Parent engagement also has its challenges and many sites have struggled with communicating with parents and getting them more involved in the program. Elevating the effort into its own principle and then dedicating technical assistance coaching time or learning collaborative sessions to the topic of parent engagement might be beneficial to program managers and future AI sites.

"The deepening of relationships and family trust is, in my mind, my number one accomplishment this year."

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2020

Organizational Agility

Prior organizational shifts prepared sites for the level of agility needed to quickly adapt programming when COVID-19 began. In earlier reports we have described efforts on behalf of the site organizations to shift policies, practice, procedures, and cultures to better support the AI model. Many of the changes were technical and related to risk management, such as changing liability policies to cover students traveling in their program manager's car, or developing guidelines about how to manage one-to-one informal relationship building time. The less drastic changes were cultural shifts, such as privileging informal modes of communication – texting, direct messaging through social media application, etc.

In concert, all these shifts meant that program managers maintained connection with students through the transition to remote learning. One site leader describes the speed at which their AI program was able to adapt, "We started by going remote, as soon as schools shutdown we were immediately connecting.

Yeah, so this past year, I think it's cool to see how the program has adapted. Normally, it is so much in-person programming and getting out together, and that isn't the case right now. It's great to see that that students are still coming and still coming together over zoom.

SITE LEADERSHIP, 2020

"I was happy that the [organization] took into consideration that it is an important part of the program [informal relationship building] and they let me see my kids in the driveway with masks and being socially distant."

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2020

Doing very regular check-ins, weekly cohort meetings, she was supporting them academically—running books from school to their houses, we started up food distribution for the weekend." This quote also illustrates how an organizational culture that is founded on creativity and problem solving allows staff to innovate and be highly responsive to their participants needs.

Furthermore, the need to innovate and the imperative to connect with youth also led most AI programs to be the first in their organizations to run in-person programming after the pandemic began. This meant that many of the program managers and their supervisors developed and tested the organization's new COVID-19 guidelines and paved the way for other programs in their organizations. A few students, in the 8th grade survey and in the two focus groups that happened after pandemic, also noted how effectively their programs were able to pivot and continue virtually. One student shared, "This program has done a very good job of continuing to run even while in a quarantine situation."

COVID-19: A Story of Resiliency

Waypoint
@ Chewonki

The two Waypoint program managers, Austin Muir and Izzy Janzen, quickly pivoted all their programming to online in March. They offered about two sessions per week and kept them all optional so students wouldn't feel pressured or stressed about attending. "We stopped our regular programming and focused more on connecting and having fun," Chewonki leadership explained.

Austin and Izzy also conducted needs assessment calls with each Waypoint family. The needs assessment helped Chewonki figure out the impact COVID-19 was having on families. With this information they connected families with community resources or dropped food and supplies off at students' homes. Chewonki leadership believe this approach helped Waypoint "[bolster their] skills in being resource routers to students and families."

Trek2Connect
@ Apex Youth Connection

Trek2Connect was one of the first sites to resume in-person programming. Melissa Cilley, the Apex Executive Director describes their rationale behind the decision,

"The biggest thing we were hearing from kids, was we were concerned about mental health and isolation, spending all of their time on a screen and as a result of those concerns we reopened in-person as soon as we possibly could and we started seeing kids all outside and in-person. That was an adjustment that took, I think we were the first ones in our area that took a very bold move that was pretty scary."

Their boldness paid off and Trek2Connect was able to safely run an abundance of outdoor and physically distanced activities, at least one or twice a week, all summer long.

NorthStar
@ University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond

Once COVID-19 hit, Lyndsey Smith, NorthStar program manager, noted that her efforts shifted to entirely individual mental health support. Every week she would meet with each student for 30 minutes. This quickly morphed into family support and connecting them to community resources. Before she knew it, she was also getting added to Google classrooms that enabled her to proactively support students with their academics.

When asked about the lasting impact of COVID-19 on her program, she says that these are the pieces she wants to hang on to in the years to come; when life more or less goes back to normal. She has gotten comfortable having the tougher conversations with families – Are you getting enough food? Do you need a gas card to come to this trip? She hopes to maintain that deeper connection with the academics, so that she can contact parents when students start falling behind.

COVID-19: A Story of Resiliency

I Know ME
@ The Game Loft

Like all programs I Know ME had to shift to a virtual format. What's different is they set up a Discord server, an online platform designed for gaming. Much to their surprise this new platform actually increased overall student engagement. For one cohort in particular, remote programming ended up being a more effective way for them to connect and bond. One student shared,

"[T]hey (the program staff) work to keep things going with zoom...we haven't taken much of a loss throughout this, we still meet regularly which I can't say for most things."

I Know ME also developed an ongoing interest-based peripheral program called the Guild. They ran optional hour-long Zoom-based programs on art, cooking, herbology, and poisonous plants, to name a few. Each session was run by a community member who has an interesting skillset to share with the students. This became a way for students to continue to interact with the community while in-person programming was on hold.

River Runners
@ Old Town – Orono YMCA

The River Runners program managers, Jessica Dumont and Gretchen Leithiser, describe the beginning of the pandemic as extremely challenging for their students and families. Out of necessity their families had to be open about their struggles, which in turn forged stronger connection with program staff and the YMCA. Even though it was hard to see her students and families in crisis, Jessica explains,

"It was really wonderful to see our YMCA community come together and make sure our families had the supplies they needed to get through the quarantine. Being able to drop food off multiple times a week, and to see how thankful they all were, really made me proud."

Gretchen was particularly struck by the students' resilience and optimism throughout the pandemic. She noted how her students also grew more bonded as a group and were dedicated to helping each other get through the particularly trying time.

Journey
@ The EdGE Program of Maine Seacoast Mission

When COVID-19 spurred a lockdown in Washington County, the Maine Seacoast Mission (MSM) began an initiative to do weekly check-ins with *every person* served by MSM. Journey's program manager, Briana West, was responsible for calling all the families from her program and used these frequent interactions to quickly connect families to other supports through MSM, such as the food pantry or emergency funds for rent or car payments.

Next, Journey had to tackle the challenge of student isolation and wellbeing. MSM allocated funds for gas so that Briana could visit her students in their driveways with masks on and socially distant or go on short walks. From Briana's perspective these moments were important lifelines for her students, "Some of my students were having meltdowns and they really appreciated being able to go on a walk."

Participants & Emerging Outcomes

The underlying theory of change for the Aspirations Incubator is that if youth-serving organizations in rural communities implement comprehensive, multi-year, mentoring-based youth programs that follow the Youth Programming Principles, these organizations will better support youth needs, encourage social and emotional skill development, and help them aspire to and reach their goals. These outcomes will result in improved higher education and career outcomes for youth in these programs, specifically, and in rural Maine, generally.

The evaluation of student outcomes draws on five sources of information to draw conclusions: the Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self Change (HSA-RSC) completed at the end of each year (over 90% participation); a supplemental student survey completed by students at the conclusion of the 8th grade (over 95% participation); insights gleaned from three focus groups with Cohort 1 students; the observations reported by program managers and stakeholders in interviews; and two years of attendance data obtained by program managers from partner schools. More information on each of these sources can be found in Appendix A of this report.

The following sections describe the first three cohorts of students and then present evidence of short-term gains observed after three years of program implementation. Depending on the question posed and the data collection instrument presented, the analysis trends students across their program involvement (e.g., students in Cohort 3 with three years of matched data); in others cases, it presents a point-in-time snapshot of all students at certain points within the program (e.g., all students after one year, etc.).⁶

Student Characteristics, Strengths, and Challenges at Enrollment

AI sites enrolled 83 new 7th grade students in Cohort 3 in Year 3, which is about the same as previous years (86 and 88, respectively). This brings the total number of students who have started the AI as part of an initial cohort to 257 although, as described previously, some have subsequently withdrawn and new students have joined.⁷ Overall, Cohort 1 was more evenly split between male and female while Cohorts 2 and 3 had slightly more females than males (Table 4). There was some variation by site in each year, and I Know ME has consistently been more male than female in all three years. Demographics by race are more difficult to decipher over the years, as respondents sometimes skipped this information or provided conflicting responses which make it difficult to distinguish legitimate changes (e.g., selecting an additional racial category to signify multi-racial heritage) from inaccurate responses (e.g., selecting different racial categories in each period). Nonetheless, the majority of students indicated they were White (80%), followed by more than one race (14%, frequently White and American Indian), and the remainder split among African American, American Indian, Asian, and Latino. For comparison, Maine's population is 94 percent White.

⁶ The latter analysis is used for comparing across program sites; pooling multiple cohorts at certain time points increases the number of cases upon which to draw conclusions.

⁷ Earlier reports included students at two sites that did not continue with the AI. The totals shown here have been adjusted to remove those students. In addition, Trek2Connect disbanded its initial cohort and rebuilt the second with new students as a result of major organizational and programming shifts described previously in the report. While included here, subsequent student outcome data from this site is limited to Cohorts 2 and 3 except in instances where data are pooled for point in time comparisons (e.g., after two years in the program).

Table 4. Initial Program Enrollment, by Cohort and Male/Female Gender⁸

Program	Cohort 1		Cohort 2		Cohort 3	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
I Know ME	100%	0%	60%	40%	73%	27%
Journey	27%	73%	35%	65%	54%	46%
North Star	43%	57%	33%	67%	38%	62%
River Runners	41%	59%	42%	58%	24%	76%
Trek2Connect*	40%	60%	60%	40%	50%	50%
Waypoint	63%	37%	50%	50%	50%	50%
All Sites	51%	49%	46%	54%	46%	54%

*Trek2Connect disbanded its initial cohort; those students are included here for comparative purposes but are not included elsewhere in the report.

Student Strengths and Challenges

Across all cohorts and sites, 243 students completed the HSA assessment (see box) when they started with the program (95% of all students). Across all cohorts and sites, students presented a number of strength and challenge areas at program initiation, averaging four strengths areas and three challenge areas (students from I Know ME and Trek2Connect had more than four challenge areas on average). The most frequent student strengths were empathy (34%), relationships with peers (28%), and emotional control (28%). The most common challenges were critical thinking (24%), reflection (24%), and optimism (20%); action orientation was listed as both a top strength (27% of students) and a top challenge (20% of students).

The strengths and challenges reported by students relate to their levels of needed supports, also called “Tiers;” Tier 1 students are in need of low levels of support and Tier 3 are in need of high levels (see box).

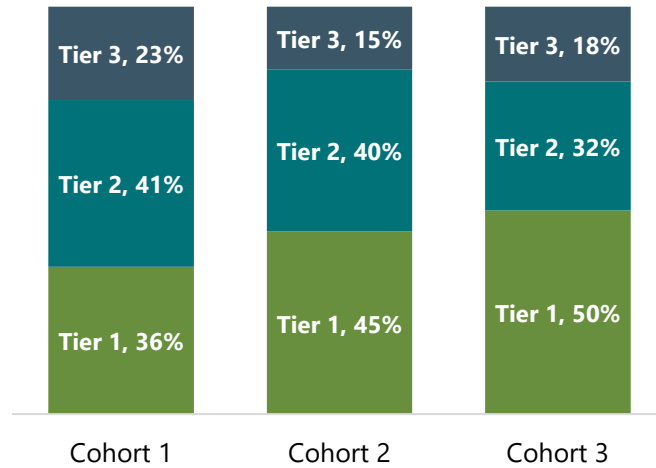
INTEPRETING THE HSA

The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) is comprised of 41 to 61 questions spanning 14 scales and grouped into three areas of life skills: Resilience, Relationships, and Learning and School Engagement. Students are asked to respond to each question on a scale, and their responses are averaged across all items in the subscale to determine whether the scale represents a strength, a challenge, or if it is considered “average” (that is, typical skill development for the child's age). The HSA also can also be administered with a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 2005), which assesses positive and negative aspects of behavior and indicates whether additional interventions are needed. Students are identified as in need of low (Tier 1), moderate (Tier 2), or high (Tier 3) levels of support depending on the number of strengths and challenges they exhibit. Students in Tier 1 exhibit primarily strengths and have few challenges, while students in Tier 3 have more challenges and are approaching (or in) crisis. According to PEAR, students in Tier 3 may need specialized intervention. This information is used by Program Managers to create an individual plan that tailors programming and interventions to meet students' unique needs. More information on these tools can be found in Appendices C and D.

⁸ Program managers have reported some students who identify as non-binary, which is not presented here to protect student confidentiality. Future reports may contain this information.

At the initiation of each cohort, 36% of Cohort 1 students self-identified as in need of Tier 1 supports, compared with 45% and 50% for Cohorts 2 and 3, as shown in Figure 9. Conversely, Cohorts 2 and 3 had a smaller proportion of students in need of Tier 3 supports (15% and 18%, respectively) when compared to Cohort 1 (23%); there were no differences by gender.

Figure 9. Cohorts at Initiation, by Tier



When examined over time to account for changes in the cohort composition as students enter or exit the program, or as students’ circumstances change over time, we observed some shifts in the distribution of Tier levels from year to year. About one quarter of students increased their needs over time (e.g., moving from Tier 2 to Tier 3) and about one quarter decreased their need level; the rest remained unchanged. Although the numbers are quite small, it appears that girls may be more likely to worsen over time, and boys more likely to improve. This is consistent with overwhelming evidence that middle school years are a critical time for adolescent girls who begin to exhibit high levels of stress, depression, and related symptoms.⁹ It is also noteworthy that there was little correlation between students who left the program and their reported levels of need, which suggests that students from all tiers were as likely to remain in the program as they were to withdraw.

⁹ For example: Breslau, Joshua & Gilman, Stephen & Stein, Bradley & Ruder, T & Gmelin, T & Miller, E. (2017). Sex differences in recent first-onset depression in an epidemiological sample of adolescents. *Translational Psychiatry*.

Rutter M, Caspi A, Moffitt T. Using sex differences in psychopathology to study causal mechanisms: Unifying issues and research strategies. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 2003;44:1092–1115.

Emerging Outcomes

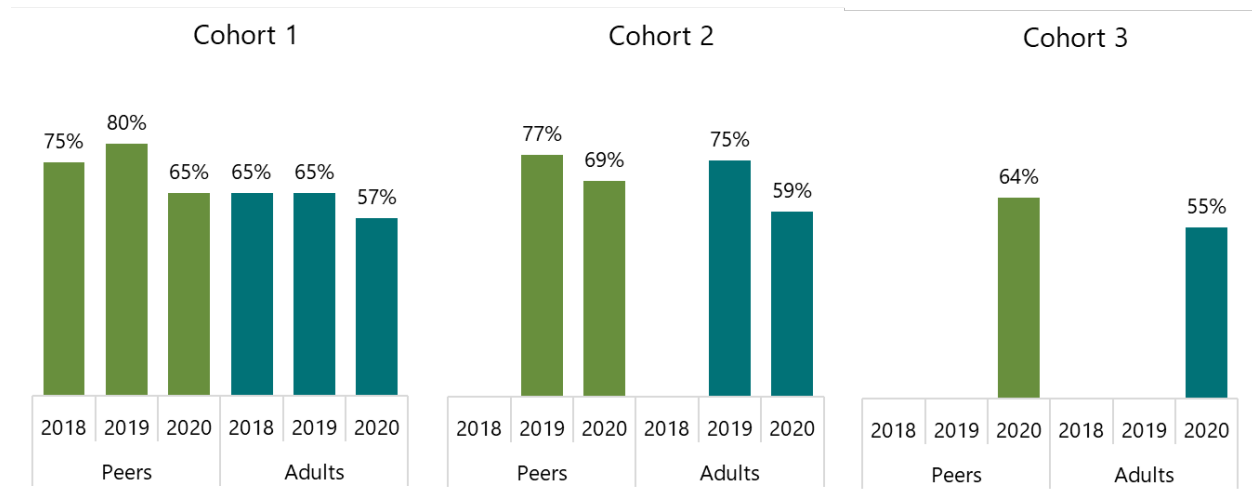
The following section discusses the cumulative results across all three years of program implementation, with the following notable highlights:

- **Relationships:** The majority of students reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships each year; 93% agreed that the program had helped them to feel connected to their community, and 84% said they have people to talk with when they feel lonely.
- **Resiliency and Social-Emotional Skills:** At least 70% of students consistently reported positive growth on four or more measures of resiliency. The overwhelming majority 8th graders reported that the program helped them learn to express their needs, make concrete plans, stay level-headed, talk to others, and understand their own strengths.
- **Exposure to Diversity:** Almost all 8th graders reported that the program helped them to experience new places and that they accept people who are different; most also said they try new things even when they are not sure about them and try to understand another person's point of view.
- **Learning, School Engagement, and Aspirations:** Over 70% of students consistently reported experiencing positive growth on measures related to learning and school engagement; in addition, AI students were half as likely to be chronically absent (that is, missing 18 or more days of school in a year) compared with their peers. Among 8th graders most said it was very true they would finish high school (89%) and have a career (85%), while 61% said it was very true that they would attend college.

Sense of Belonging and Positive Relationships

The HSA-RSC asks students to compare themselves to the beginning of the year and rate the extent to which they have experienced positive changes as a result of the program. Despite the ongoing challenges with recruiting a high number of adult volunteers, the majority of students reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships each year. Figure 10 shows the percentage of students in each cohort who reported that the program helped them to improve their relationships with adults and peers over the preceding year. However, the impact of COVID-19 on students' adult relationships can be seen clearly in 2020, where students were less likely to report improved relationships across all three cohorts.

**Figure 10. Measures of Improved Relationships:
Percent of Students Reporting Positive Change at the Conclusion of the Year, by Cohort and Year**



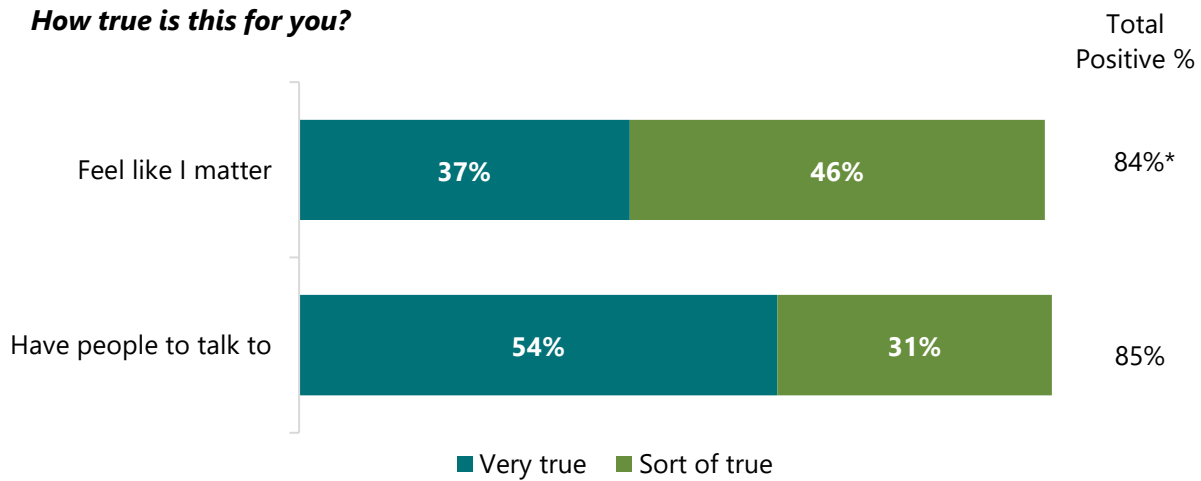
There were some notable differences by gender, with girls showing far less improvement in 2020 compared to boys and particularly among older girls. For example, 50% of girls in Cohort 1 reported improved peer relationships in 2020, compared to 78% of boys (for adult relationships, it was 46% and 67%, respectively). These relationship differences are particularly notable given our earlier observations regarding the onset of depression and anxiety among teen girls.

"This year we have seen cross friendships to develop and are now going out of their way to express kindness to other kids in their cohort."

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2019

At the conclusion of their 8th grade year, 93% of students (those in Cohorts 1 and 2) somewhat or strongly agreed that being in the program had helped them to feel connected to their community and that they belonged to something meaningful. In addition, as shown in Figure 11, 83% said it was sort of or very true that they have several people with whom to talk when they feel lonely, and 85% that they feel like they matter to their community. It should be noted that the "very true" responses were lower, 54% and 37% respectively. One student wrote, "Helping out with community makes me feel like a better person. I also have friends that I didn't have before." Another said, "Everyone who is in it are all very helpful and kind, they are someone to go to for help." Another said simply, "I ... have friends that I didn't have before." As one student wrote, "This program has ... affected me by making me feel like there are more people around me that care about me."

**Figure 11. Self-Reported Sense of Connection:
Percent of 8th Graders Responding “Somewhat or Very”**



*Total inconsistent due to rounding.

“[Name of peer mentor] has only been a mentor for Cohort 1...it’s been cool, it’s interesting because a lot of times when you’re in school you only hang out with people your age so it’s just different to hang out with someone older.”

STUDENT, 2020

In each year, Program Managers have reflected on the closeness of their cohorts, and adult mentors have offered examples of their growing connections with students. In 2020, these themes remained, but Program Managers also discussed being constrained by the realities of online programming and limited in-person contact. “It has been crazy, and it has been difficult... there is a whole new level of engagement that comes with doing things remotely, I tried my best to keep kids engaged.” However they also shared numerous examples of how the strong relationships they had built previously were helping students remain connected through a difficult period. For example, one person in a leadership position observed, “...when we had to shift to all remote, we did not lose contact with any of these students because it was relationship-focused and not programming specific.”

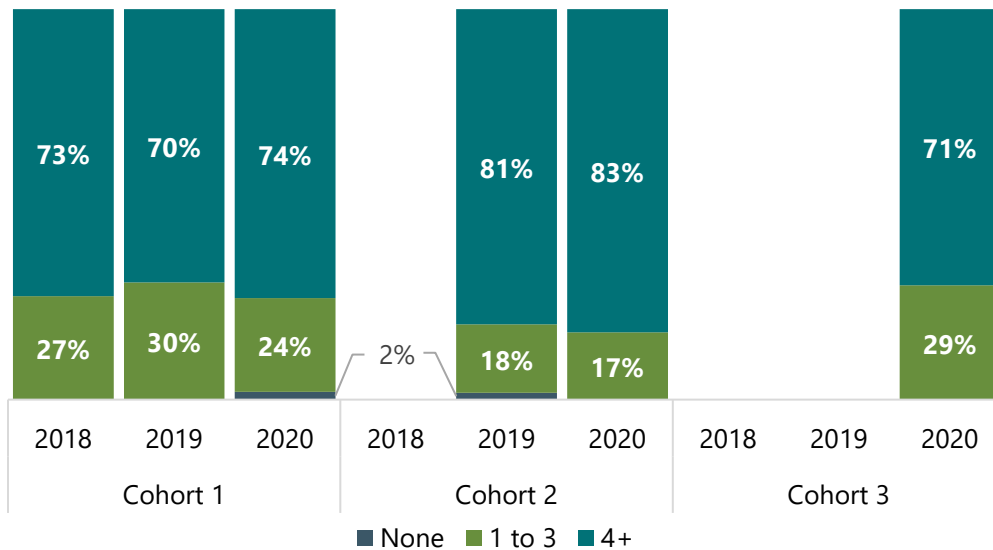
“There was maverick who wasn’t doing very well in school and had a tough home life, but he just responded like I flipped a switch when he was out shooting hoops and I told him what a great job he was doing and complimented him and his whole demeanor just changed.”

ADULT MENTOR, 2020

Social-Emotional Skills and Resilience

Recall that the HSA-RSC asks students to compare themselves to the beginning of the year and rate the extent to which they have experienced positive changes as a result of the program. On average, at the end of each program year students reported positive growth on four to five of the seven measures; as shown in Figure 12, at least 70% of students in each cohort reported experiencing positive growth in four or more areas of resilience each year.

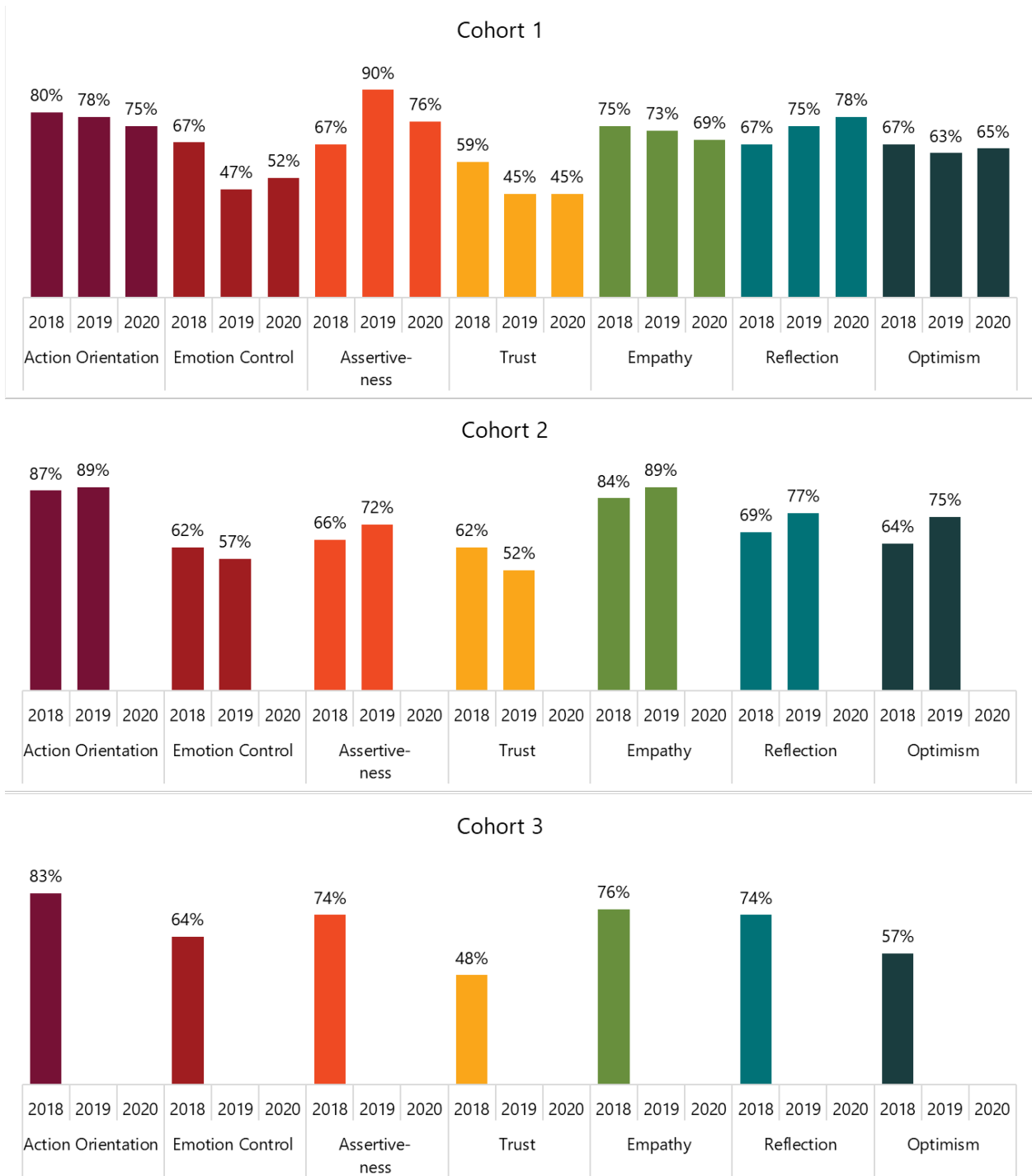
Figure 12. Overall Resilience: Number of Areas of Positive Change Reported at the Conclusion of the Year, by Cohort and Year



More specifically, Figure 13 shows the percentage of students reporting positive growth on each of the individual measures related to resilience at the conclusion of each year of program involvement; results are shown for each cohort for comparative purposes. Although there was some variation from year to year in terms of the proportion of students reporting growth on individual domains, as demonstrated above most students consistently reported growth on at least three measures of resilience. In particular, a large proportion of students consistently reported positive changes in the areas of Action Orientation (engagement in physical and hands-on activities), Assertiveness (confidence in putting oneself forward, advancing personal beliefs, wishes or thoughts, standing up for what one believes), Empathy (recognition of other’s feelings and experiences), and Reflection (inner thought processes and self-awareness).

The proportion of students who reported positive growth in Trust and, to a lesser degree, Emotion Control appeared to decrease during the second year in the program; however, it may be that those are areas where students had less growth potential after the first year of programming. Put another way, some students may not have reported much change in a given year if they changed significantly in the year before. It is also worth noting that students in Cohort 3 had similar rates when compared with the first year of Cohort 1 and 2 except in the areas of Trust and Optimism. It is likely that the impact of COVID-19 on programming affected the ability for students in Cohort 3 to experience growth in those areas to the same degree as earlier cohorts. It will be important to observe their progress in future years once programming has returned to normal.

**Figure 13. Measures of Resilience:
Percent of Students Reporting Positive Change at the Conclusion of the Year, by Cohort and Year**



As we saw with relationships, girls were somewhat less likely to report gains in these areas when compared with boys, particularly in 2020. For example, for Cohort 1 (ninth graders in 2020), only 29% of girls reported an increase in trust, compared with 59% of boys (for optimism, it was 50% and 78%,

respectively). Although less disparate, these patterns persist among younger students. Again, it is hard to know whether these represent areas of concern, the impact of COVID-19, or simply that girls did not perceive that they improved in these areas as much as boys. When looking at the self-assessment data from the start of the year, however, girls were not notably higher in these areas to begin with.

"It has showed me not to go and yell at people when I get mad."

8th GRADER, 2019

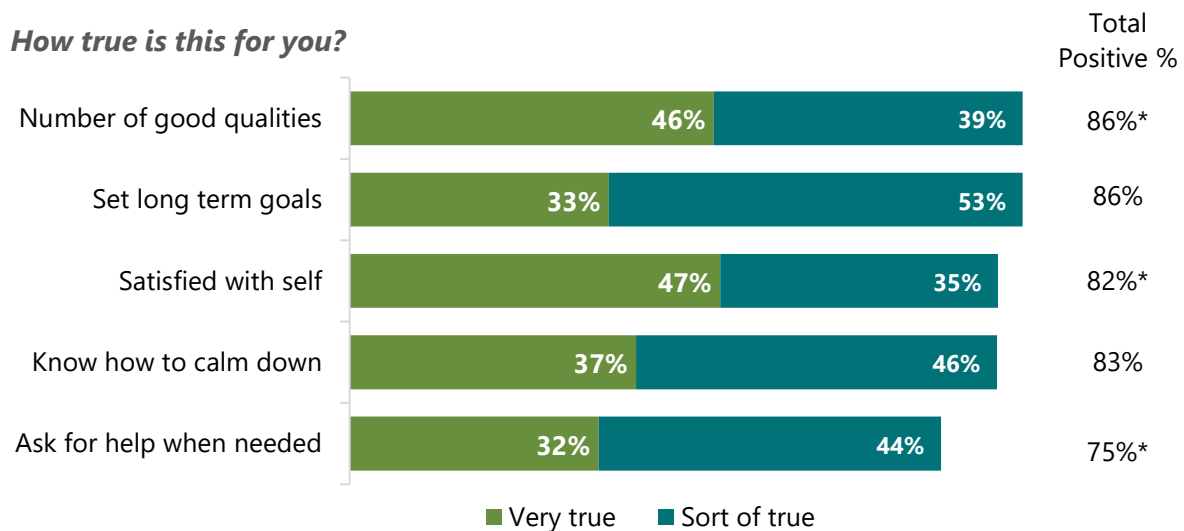
Students' responses to the 8th grade student survey provide additional insight into their assessment of their skills and behaviors. In terms of what they learned from the program, most students agreed or strongly agreed that they learned how to express their needs (87%), make concrete plans (87%), stay level-headed (89%), talk to others (93%), and understand their own strengths (92%). In addition, when asked how much certain characteristics were "true" for them, 85% said it was sort of or very true that they had a number of good qualities and set long-term goals for themselves (Figure 14). Eighty-three percent know how to calm down when they get upset and 82% were satisfied with themselves; 75% said they ask for help when they need it.

"I think I'm more open to people and I've made more friends."

8th GRADER, 2020

However, Figure 14 also demonstrates that less than half of students thought these statements were "very true" which suggests that they are remaining areas for growth or future focus. Nonetheless, students had many things to say about how the program has helped them learn about themselves and talk with others. For example, "It makes me deal with people who don't like me and vice versa," and "It has helped me make connections and understand the people in our group more." Others shared how the program has increased their confidence and being more outgoing, with one saying "It has made me realize my true potential, and I have become a better person because of it. I'm better with people and I have more friends." Another wrote, "It has made me more confident when I am giving input."

**Figure 14. Self-Reported Social-Emotional Skills:
Percent of 8th Graders Responding "Sort of or Very True"**



*Total inconsistent due to rounding.

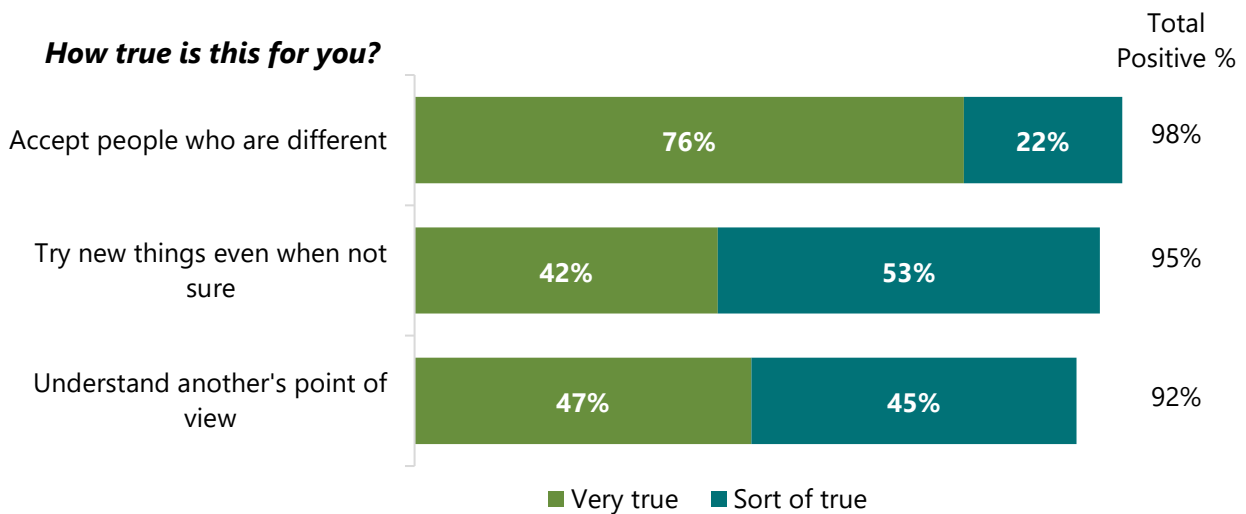
Exposure to Diversity

One of the goals of the program is to expose students to a diversity of people, places and experiences. Indeed, as previously shared, 75% of 8th graders very much agreed that the program has helped them to experience new places. Similarly, as shown in Figure 15, 76% reported that it was very true that they accept people who are different, 47% said they try to understand another person’s point of view and 42% said they try new things, even when they are not sure they will like them; as shown, these rates are substantially higher when combined with students who reported this as “sort of true.”

“It’s helped me understand different cultures better and get closer with my community.”

8th GRADER, 2020

**Figure 15. Self-Reported Acceptance of Diversity:
Percent of 8th Graders Responding “Sort of or Very True”**



While students experienced new things and demonstrated skills that exhibit tolerance, only 30% very much agreed that they had interacted with people from different cultures as a result of the program. This was consistent across sites with the notable exception of River Runners, where 63% of students very much agreed that they interact with people from different cultures; this makes sense as River Runners has consistently engaged with members of the international student association at UMaine to provide

“This program has changed the way I look at other people and has gotten me more interactive in certain situations.”

8th GRADER, 2020

presentations about their home countries as part of their regular programming. However, students did talk about meeting new people more generally and their increased willingness to take chances. As one student noted, “It has definitely helped me experience things I wouldn’t have normally been able to or would have thought to do before. It has helped me gotten to know different people and helped me get out of my shell.” Students in the focus groups also talked at length about their exposure to new ideas and experiences as a result of being in the program, but had little to say about different people and cultures specifically. Given the current socio-political environment and the addition of an equity and inclusion scale on the HSA instrument, we may see these patterns shift in subsequent years.

Learning, School Engagement, and Aspirations

Again, recall that the HSA-RSC asks students to compare themselves to the beginning of the year and rate the extent to which they have experienced positive changes as a result of the program. On average, at the end of each program year students reported positive growth on three of the five measures related to learning and school engagement. Figure 16 shows the percentage of students reporting positive growth on each of the individual measures related to learning and school engagement at the conclusion of each year of program involvement; results are shown for each cohort for comparative purposes. Over 70% of students consistently reported experiencing positive growth on all the measures with the exception of School Bonding (positive personal connections and the sense of belonging in one's school). Similarly, key informants provided numerous examples over the years of students taking more initiative to connect with teachers and advocate for themselves around their academic needs. For example, one school principal recently observed, "Particularly around academics, if they are having an issue with the teacher they go to the teacher, if they are having issues with their coursework they go to the teacher to figure out what to do about it."

Again, there may be some differences in gender. For example, for Cohort 1 girls were more likely to demonstrate positive growth on the academic indicators in earlier years, particularly in terms of perseverance and academic motivation. However, they were less likely than boys to report positive growth in 2020; 62% of girls reported improvements in terms of perseverance and 33% reported improvements in terms of school bonding, compared with boys at 89% and 60%, respectively. There was a similar if less disparate pattern within critical thinking. Again, it is possible that these reflect areas where girls have already improved and thus they were less likely report additional growth compared with boys. However, the self-assessment data from the start of the year shows that these areas were "average" (that is, neither a strength nor challenge) for the majority of students, regardless of gender, which suggests some had capacity for growth.

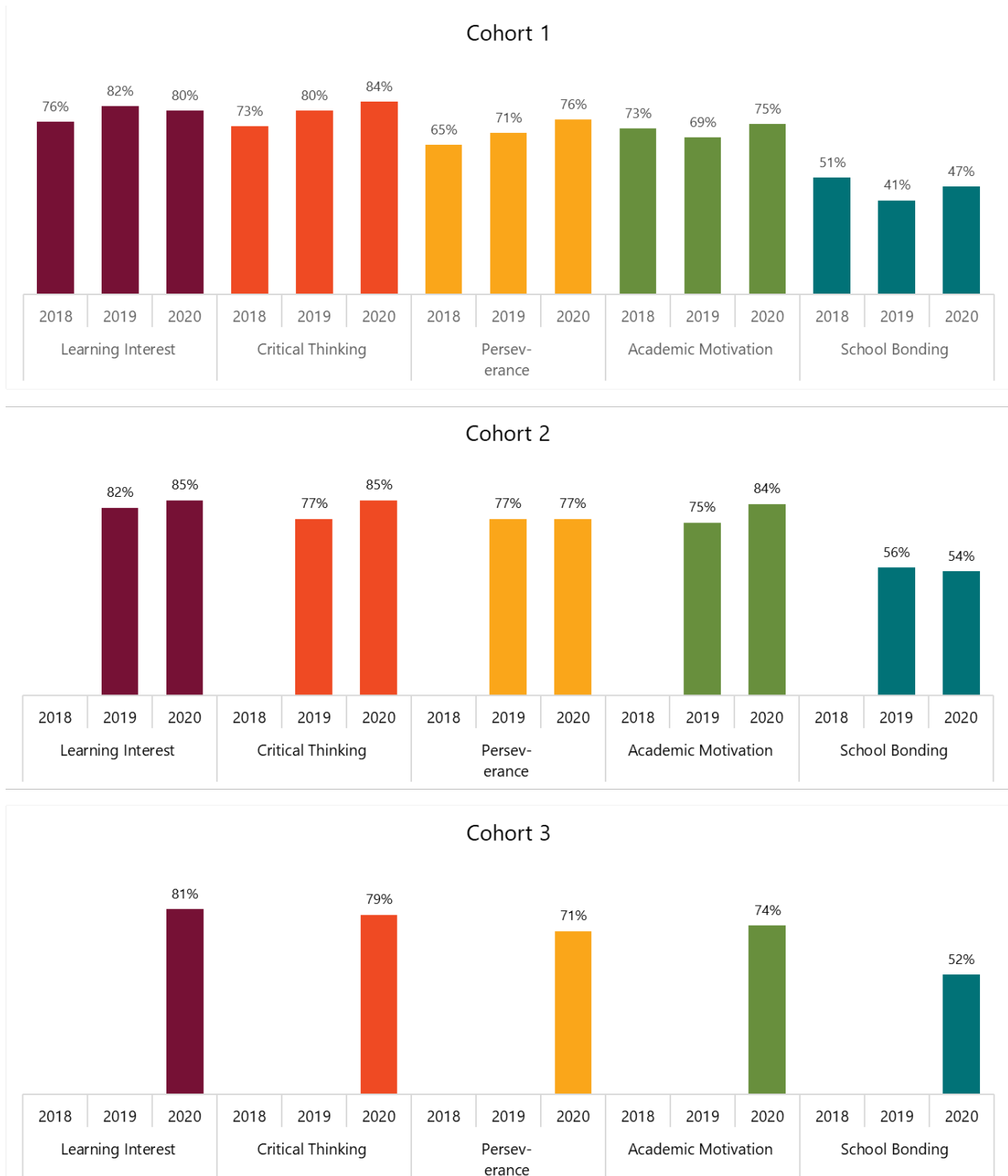
"[I have seen many of them have a much lower truancy rate at school this year. They said they want to be at school because of being in the program. I have seen them doing better academically, as they want to hold true to the academic pledge they created."

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2018

"The parents say that the students really work to keep their grades up because they want to go on a trip."

PROGRAM MANAGER, 2020

**Figure 16. Measures of Learning and School Engagement:
Percent of Students Reporting Positive Change at the Conclusion of the Year,
by Cohort and Year**

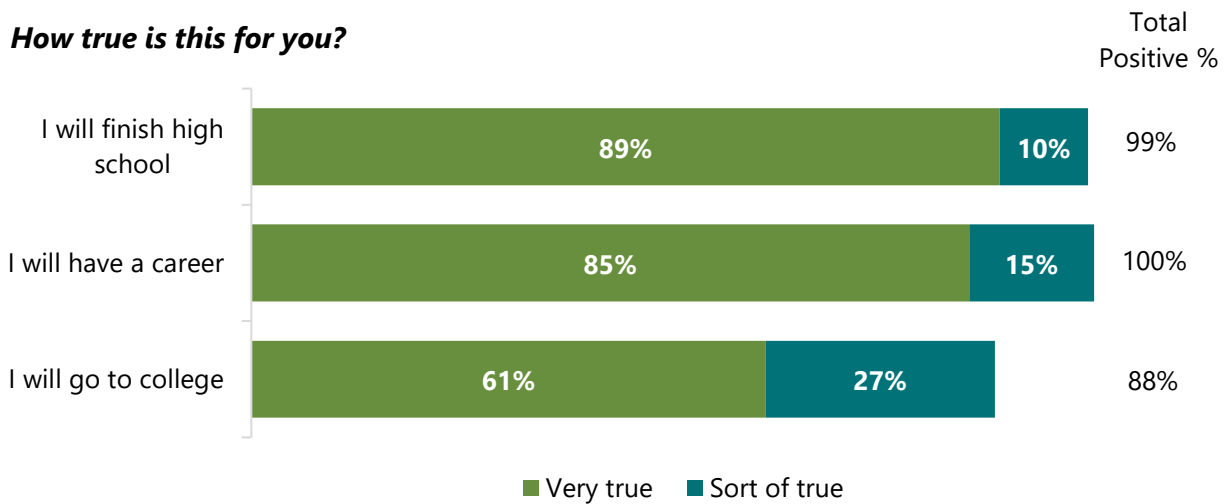


In terms of longer-term aspirations, the survey of 8th graders showed that the overwhelming majority of students felt it was very true that they would finish high school (89%) and have a career (85%; see Figure 17). However, only 61% said it was very true they would go to college. This varied widely by site, from 27% to 87%. It is worth noting that these rates of intention to complete high school and attend college align closely to the statewide rates of high school graduation and college initiation for Maine (87% in 2019 and 62% in 2018, respectively). As these initial cohorts continue their journey into high school, it will be telling whether students maintain or grow their college and career aspirations.

"It has affected me in a good way because it has helped me focus on my careers, and we have had a lot of fun."

8th GRADER, 2020

**Figure 17. Measures of Aspiration:
Percent of 8th Graders Reporting Sort of or Very True**



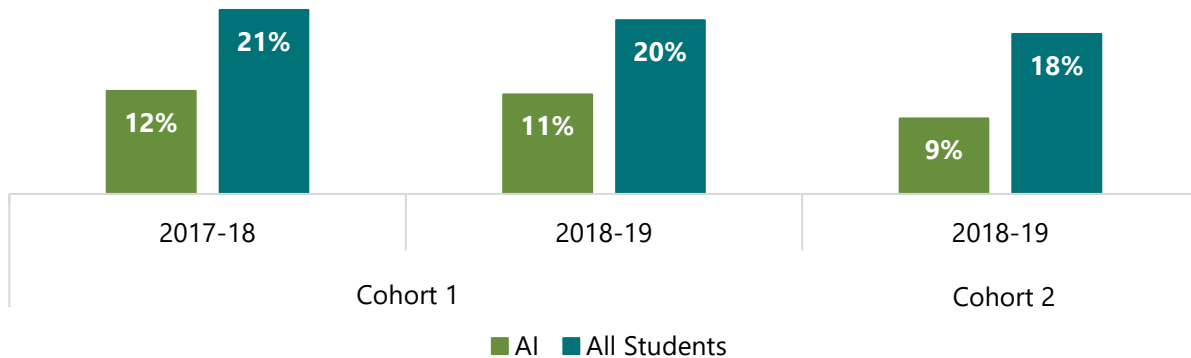
"It has allowed me [to] understand what I want to do with my life and how to be successful with my goals in life."

8th GRADER, 2019

Many students shared examples of how the program was helping them aspire to something more. For example, one focus group participant stated, "[Program Manager] took me to a place where s/he thought it might be a potential job opportunity and connected me to different science opportunities over the summer." Another described a college trip and stated, "it made me think about what college might actually be like." Another student provided important context to understanding students aspirations; after describing the career they hoped to pursue, the student stated, "I don't know if I'm going to go to college or not, if that's needed for me, I'm kind of on that precipice." It is important to recognize that these survey data only reflect programming and student aspirations after the 8th grade; it will be critical to continue monitoring student aspirations to see whether these trends shift by the 10th and 12th grade years.

In addition, this year the sites were able to gather information about their cohorts from the participating schools which allow some further insight into the impact on known measures of school success: attendance.¹⁰ Attendance data for the first two years of program implementation was shared by five of the six programs, and was reliably consistent across all of them. The data showed that AI students were half as likely to be chronically absent (missing 18 or more days of school in a year) compared with their peers in each year and each cohort (Figure 18). Although the numbers are small (only 60 to 70 students per Cohort), this suggests that being part of the AI programs may be helping students to attend school somewhat more regularly.

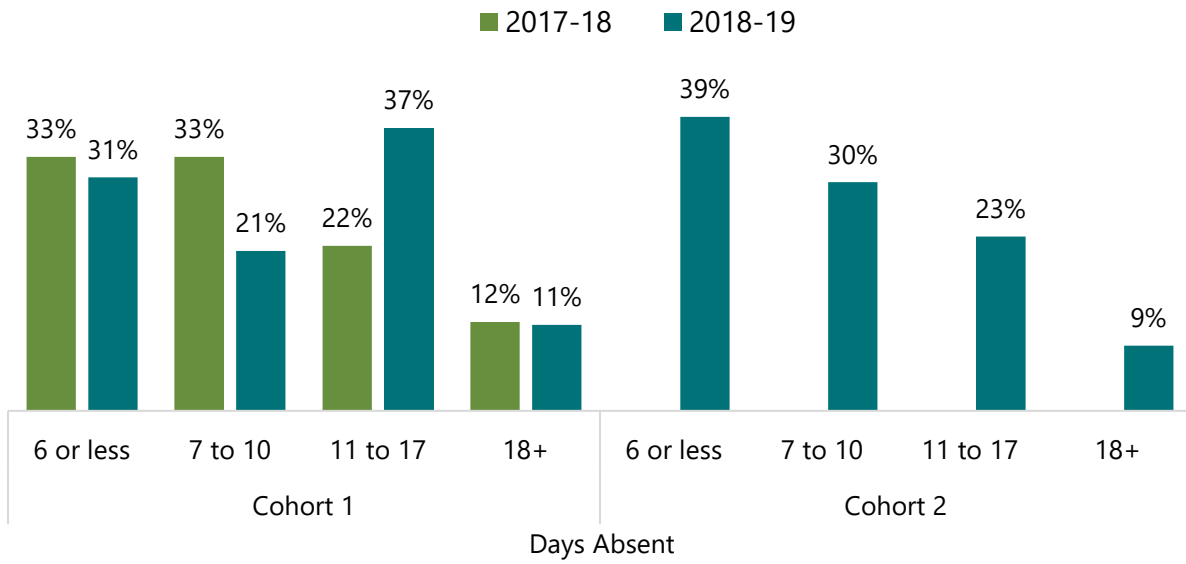
Figure 18. Percent of Chronically Absent Students (Missed 18+ Days), by Year: AI Cohorts 1 & Compared to All Students



However, the data also showed that the total number of days absent worsened between 7th and 8th grades for Cohort 1. Specifically, Figure 19 on the following page shows the percentage of students absent for 11 to 17 days increased from 22% in 2017-18 to 37% in 2018-19. In particular, attendance patterns at Journey and River Runners shifted notably, while the others remained fairly stable. It will be important to continue monitoring attendance data in future years once school schedules have returned to normal.

¹⁰ Data were collected and analyzed for the 2017-18 and 2019-20 school years because the 2020-21 school year was disrupted by COVID-19. While achievement data was collected in addition to attendance, the wide variation in how it was measured and reported precluded meaningful cross-site comparisons.

**Figure 19. Total Days Absent:
Percent of Students, by Cohort and Year**



Conclusion and Recommendations

After completing the first three years of programming, the AI pilot sites are generally implementing six unique youth development programs with fidelity to the Youth Programming Principles. Informal relationships are a high priority, program coordinators administer the HSA assessments and use the results to craft programming, and the activities and trips expose students to a wide range of new experiences. While some aspects lag behind expectations – notably, mentoring, building a support network and enhancing youth voice – there is ample evidence to suggest that the program sites can fully establish all the principles within their programs over the next three years. Retention, while not quite at the target rate at all sites, is nonetheless high and seems to be improving. In terms of evaluating the success of this model over the six years, however, it will be challenging if any more students are lost from the first cohorts.

The AI pilot has also yielded many lessons in the first three years about what it takes for an organization to successfully implement the Youth Programming Principles.

- **Leadership buy-in:** First and foremost, those in leadership positions, including the Board of Directors, must be committed to the model by learning the principles, supporting program activities that maintain fidelity to them, and changing policies and procedures, and organizational priorities and systems as needed to live up to those principles.
- **Program integration:** Organizations must integrate the AI model and principles into the broader mission and goals of the organization, and ensure that the program staff does not operate in isolation.
- **Knowledge management:** Organizations must invest in sound knowledge management practices by ensuring multiple staff understand the core components upon which the program is built, and that critical program information can be easily transferred to incoming staff.
- **Organizational agility:** Successful implementation of the Youth Programming Principles requires an organization to be nimble and willing to shift gears to support innovation. In earlier years, this emerged when programs sought to streamline program processes, structures, and curricula in order to effectively deliver their programs to multiple groups. In this third year, organizational flexibility enabled AI programs to respond to the immediate needs posed by COVID-19 and keep their programs running, even while many others were suspended.

After three years of programming, the AI sites have served over 250 students from Maine’s rural communities. The evidence is mounting that students experience real and measurable benefits from being part of an AI program. The vast majority of students report growth on multiple measures of relationships, resiliency, exposure to different ideas and places, and learning and academic engagement. Students’ qualitative responses consistently showed how they thought they were acquiring new skills, experiencing new things, engaging in self-discovery, and learning new behaviors as a result of the program.

- The majority of students reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships each year; 93% agreed that the program had helped them to feel connected to their community, and 84% said they have people to talk with when they feel lonely.
- At least 70% of students consistently reported positive growth on four or more measures of resiliency. The overwhelming majority 8th graders reported that the program helped them learn to

express their needs, make concrete plans, stay level-headed, talk to others, and understand their own strengths.

- Almost all 8th graders reported that the program helped them to experience new places and that they accept people who are different; most also said they try new things even when they are not sure about them and try to understand another person's point of view.
- Over 70% of students consistently reported experiencing positive growth on measures related to learning and school engagement; in addition, AI students were half as likely to be chronically absent (that is, missing 18 or more days of school in a year) compared with their peers.
- Among 8th graders most said it was very true they would finish high school (89%) and have a career (85%), while 61% said it was very true that they would attend college.
- In all outcome areas, older girls (i.e., those in Cohort 1, or ninth grade) in 2020 were less likely to report positive growth when compared with boys. The most notable differences were in relationships (peer and adult), trust, optimism, perseverance and school bonding.

While the third year of data likely reflects the negative impacts of COVID-19 on programs and students' wellbeing, it is a testament to the programs, students, families and communities that we did not observe sharper declines. However, when looking ahead to the next three years of program implementation, the successes and challenges faced by the AI pilot and the program sites must be framed within the ongoing context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While programs maintained contact with students and even started new cohorts in 2020, COVID-19 has forced a fundamental shift to remote programming, limited in-person interaction, and a reduced school presence. This raises many questions: will programs be able to build such strong cohorts in coming years? Will the existing relationships, without trips and activities, be enough to sustain the current cohorts? Will programs irrevocably shift into something new? The impact of the pandemic on programs' capacity to recruit students, build individual and group relationships, engage community stakeholders, and maintain long-term engagement remains to be seen.

"[Our AI] students generally come from a more adverse background and low socio-economic status than the other students and the disparities between those students became more extreme after COVID. These students are more likely to be doing remote learning maybe because they have a sick family member. I don't think you will see as positive data as you would like because of those disparities between students. And this is not a reflection of the merit of the program."

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL, 2020

Recommendations

Against the backdrop of the successes, lessons learned, and future challenges contained herein, we offer the following recommendations as the AI navigates the fourth year of program implementation.

For AI Organizations and Programs

The first set of recommendations are provided with an eye towards what organizations and programs should be doing to implement the AI over the next three years to achieve the highest level of fidelity and student success. Implementing these recommendations cannot be the responsibility of a single program, nor a single program manager; staff is at full capacity running engaging with multiple cohorts of students. Instead, they will require organizational leadership to commit time and resources to build the necessary infrastructure around each of the AI programs.

- **Recommendation 1: Strategically Address Retention & Cohort Sizes.** Long-term engagement is central to the AI program model and sites chose different target ranges for their cohort sizes (ranging from 10 to 20). In the last three years of the program, sites should take into account the following factors when determining future cohort sizes: staff capacity, potential staff turnover, and what it takes to run three simultaneous cohorts, particularly in terms of informal relationship building and the on-going restrictions related to COVID.
- **Recommendation 2: Build Organizational Capacity to Recruit Adult & Peer Mentors.** All programs have struggled to recruit and retain adult and peer mentors during the past three years; none are meeting the target of having one mentor for every three students. To meet the expectations of this programming principle within the next three years, the organizations need to build a robust volunteer pipeline and infrastructure that program managers can easily access, rather than relying on the AI program managers to achieve this on their own. Indeed, some organizations have already begun to build this capacity and can provide support and learning to their AI peers.
- **Recommendation 3: Broaden Organizational Integration of the AI Program.** After the first three years of the program, it is clear that leadership buy-in and full program integration are key to the success of AI programs. The AI organizations need to fully integrate the Youth Programming Principles into their organizational expectations so that everyone is familiar with them, the supporting documentation and tools, and how they can and should be applied. This should include staff who supervise program managers, key leadership personnel, board members, and development staff in addition to program managers. In addition, the mission and goals of the organization should reflect the Programming Principles as well to ensure that policies and procedures across the organization are not implemented in ways that conflict with the principles.
- **Recommendation 4: Deepen Organizational Understanding of the HSA Tools.** Following on the previous recommendation, the Holistic Student Assessment (and to a lesser degree the HSA-RSC) plays a critical role in the comprehensive approach to youth development. Self-assessment data from the start of the year (or program start) can be compared with retrospective data from the end of the year to explore whether students' experiences with the program are growing their strengths; this can be examined both individually and in aggregate for an entire cohort and be used to further tailor informal relationship building and programming. In aggregate these tools can also help programs demonstrate their results over

the longer term. However, not all sites have fully incorporated the results from these tools into their programming, nor have they been able to develop individual growth plans for students. To strengthen and sustain this aspect of the program, organizations need to ensure program managers have the resources and support they need to continue using the results.

- **Recommendation 5: Build Community Connections to Support Wellbeing.** The third year of programming saw more students expressing higher needs and exhibiting less growth than in previous years; students and families, already navigating life stressors at the best of times, faced enormous strains. Indeed, COVID-19 has pushed programs to strengthen this aspect of their work. However, not all programs are where they need to be in terms of building a network of community supports and establishing strong linkages with formal care providers. Organizations and program managers should prioritize building these connections in the coming years as the pandemic and its repercussions endure. In addition, girls in particular appeared to have some challenges during the past year. Given that the upcoming years are critical for them in terms of the onset of depression and anxiety, programs need to pay close attention to girls' mental wellbeing and work to identify community supports that can address these specific needs.
- **Recommendation 6: Support Learning on Equity and Inclusion.** AI student cohorts are more diverse than the overall population of Maine. While students have exhibited acceptance of others, fewer agreed that they are being exposed to people from different cultures or are learning to understand other points of view as a result of the program. Given the social justice protests over the past year—coupled with the new HSA scales related to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion being piloted at some AI—it is likely these topics will emerge within the cohort groups in the coming years. AI sites should proactively examine how their programs are implemented with an eye towards diversity, equity and inclusion, and consider how they will help program staff learn to hold and navigate these potentially challenging conversations within their student groups. The Lerner Foundation can support this work by providing learning opportunities and discussion amongst the AI sites.

For the Lerner Foundation

The remaining set of recommendations is offered to the Lerner Foundation to consider in its role as convener and coach to support the success of the programs. Moreover, these steps will help strengthen the tools that wrap around the Youth Programming Principles and help the Aspirations Incubator model expand its reach beyond the original six sites.

- **Recommendation 7: Revisit the Principles and Fidelity Expectations.** As the AI programs navigate the new reality of implementing their programs during COVID-19 and beyond, the Lerner Foundation should revisit the Youth Programming Principles in terms of how they are put into practice and assessed. If targets are no longer feasible, new expectations should be set. It may be that new targets or programming components should be added. Notably, the principles should emphasize the important role of parents and family in the model. This could include setting specific targets and expectations for family engagement.
- **Recommendation 8: Establish Meaningful Benchmarks for Student Success.** The fidelity targets help the AI programs to know where they are in terms of building and implementing their programs but provide little context for programs to understand where they should be in terms of achieving student outcomes. Indeed, this report has presented the first deep dive

into three years' worth of data, and yet the question remains: where *should* students be after completing one, two or three years with the program? For example, is 70% of students achieving positive growth *sufficient*? While it is simple to assign targets mathematically (e.g., based on averages or distributions), it is more difficult to create meaningful ones that reflect intentional program design, the trajectory of youth development, and established measurement norms. In the coming year, the Lerner Foundation should work with the program evaluators, PEAR, Trekkers, and program sites to identify meaningful benchmarks to indicate where student outcomes should be after three years of programming and against which to gauge future cohorts.

- **Recommendation 9: Provide Guidance on Youth Voice and Choice.** While AI programs have successfully engaged in many aspects of youth voice and choice, some aspects of this principle have yet to fully emerge. Specifically, having youth take over aspects of educational process was lower on the student surveys and students described more transactional instances of providing input (e.g., where to go, or what to eat). While components of this principle will continue to evolve as students mature and cohorts acquire group consensus-making skills, it could be helpful for the Lerner Foundation to provide some additional support. For example, more guidance on approaches or formats tailored to specific age groups, and concrete examples of what power sharing can look like within a program. Additional nuance for what to incorporate at various programming or development stages (e.g., 7th and 8th grades, versus 11th and 12th grades) may also help program managers to better know where they should be with a specific cohort. Congruent to recommendation five above, the fidelity targets could also be revised to reflect more incremental progress on this principle.
- **Recommendation 10: Ramp-Up Coordinated Sustainability Planning.** The AI programs require a substantial financial investment to operate. As discussed, organizations are eager to begin a coordinated effort around raising funds and awareness to sustain the AI program beyond Year 6. Sites look to the Lerner Foundation to lead this endeavor in the short term to help build a unified, cross-site strategy, and to help each organization to build their individual capacity to tackle this in the future. Specifically, organizational leadership would like help connecting with other possible funders, accessing development consultants to help with their sustainability strategy, and crafting individual sustainability plans. They also look to the Lerner Foundation to communicate and market the successes of the AI pilot overall, and to support them in taking on these marketing efforts for their individual programs.

Looking Ahead

This interim report shares the significant themes that emerged after three years of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot programs (September 2017 to August 2020), focusing primarily on the extent to which programs operated with fidelity to the Youth Programming Principles, lessons learned around implementation, emerging student outcomes, and the impact of COVID-19 on programs. While the next major report will occur at the conclusion of the sixth programming year, when Cohort 1 graduates from 12th grade, the intervening years provide important touchpoints to monitor the notable patterns that have emerged. In particular, the evaluation team will continue to explore the impact of COVID-19 on programs—notably engagement (retention, recruitment), and mentoring—and to document the recovery process of returning to “normal programming.” Moreover, we will continue to examine students’ self-reported gains in critical measures of relationships and resilience, and focus on the experiences of girls as they progress through high school. Lastly, Year 4 will yield the first round of 10th grade surveys, which will allow the evaluation to begin exploring students’ self-reported skills and aspirations at two different time points (8th and 10th grades) and enable us to draw stronger conclusions about the impact of the Aspirations Incubator on participants and their longer-term goals.

Appendix A: Methods and Data Source Notes

The overall Aspirations Incubator evaluation design employs a mixed methods approach that utilizes qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the program's implementation and progress towards stated goals. In this three-year interim report six data sources were used: 78 key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, community stakeholders, and mentors; six Aspirations Incubator semi-annual site reports (December 2017 through September 2020); three years of information data from the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) and Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self Change (HSA-RSC); 8th grade student experience surveys from 2019 and 2020; three student focus groups; and data on school attendance and grades. Qualitative data from the interviews, and open-response questions from the site reports and were coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Quantitative data from the site reports and the HSA and HSA-RSC were analyzed using MS Excel to produce basic descriptive statistics. Below are more in-depth descriptions of each of the data collection methods used:

Key Informant Interviews

Each program year, all Program Managers and at least one individual from the leadership of each organization were solicited to participate in interviews. List of potential community stakeholders to interview were generated after each round of staff interviews. Program Managers helped the Evaluation Team make contact with those individuals and a second round of interviews were conducted. In Year 2, the evaluation team also interviewed a board member from each organization. A total of 78 interviews were conducted: 27 from Year One, 23 from Year 2, and 28 from Year 3.

Program Managers and organizational leaders were asked the same set of questions about the past year of recruitment and implementation, both its successes and challenges, recommendations, and to learn about the site's future program plans. Board members were asked about the Board's role in the program and its integration with the broader organization. Community stakeholders were asked questions about their experiences with the program, the successes and challenges they saw, and what their recommendations were, if any. One peer mentor was under age 18 and active parental consent was obtained in advance of the interview. The University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board approved all interview protocols.

Semi-Annual Site Reports

Site reports were developed to track program process and quality counts around recruitment and enrollment, attendance, program activities, program development, outreach, and staffing. They also garner open response feedback about the site's successes and lessons learned, and whether they need any additional support. Site reports are collected from grantees every 6 months. In 2019, the reporting periods were shifted from December–May and June–November to September–February and March–August to better align with the program year. This change happened midway through the 2018–2019 program year, which resulted one reporting period that is longer than most: December 2018–September 2019. The reports are collected through the SurveyMonkey.com platform and Excel Workbooks and PDF files are extracted for analysis. Descriptive statistics are done within Excel and the PDF reports are imported into NVivo for qualitative analysis.

Holistic Student Assessment Data

The Lerner Foundation has an agreement with PEAR to help collect, process and analyze the HSA and HSA-RSC data on behalf of the AI sites and to produce site specific and aggregate data files. This involves providing a secure, on-line platform to administer the assessment as well as subsequent cleaning, processing and analysis; for example, to compile scale scores, identify the “tier” into which students fall based on their responses, and to compare the AI responses to the larger pool of HSA/HSA-RSC responses. Per the agreement, the Evaluation Team has access to these processed MS Excel files for each site as well as the aggregate results; these processed data files were used by the Evaluation Team to conduct additional analysis and visualizations for this report.

The Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self Change (HSA-RSC) contains 61 items that correspond to the HSA and is completed at the end of the year. It asks students to reflect on their involvement with the program and report the extent to which the program influenced them positively or negatively for each criterion. At the conclusion of Year 3, 83 students in Cohort 1 (98% of those enrolled at the end of the year), 87 students in Cohort 2 (94% enrolled at the end of the year) and 41 students from Cohort 3 (X% of those enrolled) had completed the HSA-RSC assessment. For trending analysis, assessments were matched across multiple years to ensure that only students who had the full range of data points were included (e.g., T1, T2 and T3); this includes 51 students from Cohort 1 (60% of all assessments), 57 students from Cohort 2, and 41 students from Cohort 3.

Student Survey

Cohorts 1 and 2 were asked to participate in a short supplemental student survey after the completion of their 8th grade year. The survey contained 30 questions asking students about their experiences with the program, the extent to which the program has helped them learn skills (e.g., being in this program has helped me take with other people even when we disagree), and self-reported statements about their own behaviors (e.g., I try new things even when I’m not sure I will like them). The survey tool was administered electronically via the SurveyMonkey platform and in paper form. Passive consent forms were sent to parents at least three weeks before the survey was given to students. Program Managers administered the survey to their students over the course of the summer in 2019 and 2020. Cohort 1 had approximately 86 active students at the time the survey was deployed (measured in September 2019); 76 students completed the survey for a response rate of 89%. Cohort 2 had approximately 74 active students at the time the survey was deployed (measured in April 2020); 69 students completed the survey for a response rate of 93%. The University of Southern Maine’s Institutional Review Board approved all survey consents and protocols.

Student Focus Groups

In the original evaluation plan, three site visits were planned for Year 3. NorthStar, I Know ME, and Journey were the three sites selected to have visits. The site visits had a few data collection methods planned, which included a youth focus group with Cohort 1. However, due to COVID-19 only one in-person site visit was conducted at NorthStar before all the sites and their partner schools ceased in-person programming. In order to incorporate more youth voice in the interim report, two virtual focus groups were facilitated in the winter of 2020/2021 using Zoom and Google Hangouts with I Know ME and Journey. The focus group protocol was adapted for these virtual focus groups to utilize Zoom/Google Hangouts chat features and to ask questions about the effects of COVID-19 on the students’ program experience. Passive consent forms were sent to parents at least three weeks before the focus group was

conducted with students. The University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board approved all in-person and virtual focus group consents and protocols.

School Data

In the summer and fall of 2020, AI sites worked with their partner schools to get attendance and achievement records for students enrolled in Cohorts 1 and 2 for the 2017-18 and 2019-20 academic years; the 2020-21 school year was not included due to disruptions caused by COVID-19. Using a MS Excel template provided by the DIP, sites sent a request to school personnel that included the list of AI students. Schools then compiled attendance and achievement data for those students, as well as providing similar counts for all students in their corresponding grade (e.g., Cohort 1 was in grades 7 and 8 in 2017-18 and 2018-19, respectively). Attendance data was requested using categories and thresholds used by the Maine Department of Education, with 18+ days being considered chronic absenteeism. Achievement data was requested in the following categories, which could be further defined by each school: "Below, At or Above Grade Level." Schools returned the data files to the AI sites and the results were shared with the DIP for review and analysis. The attendance data for the first two years of program implementation was shared by five of the six programs, and was reliably consistent across all of them. Unfortunately, the wide variation in how achievement is measured and reported by local schools precluded meaningful cross-site comparisons, although results remain useful for individual program sites.



Appendix B: Fidelity Framework for Youth Programming Principles

The Aspirations Incubator's Fidelity and Accountability Framework
Trekking's 10 Youth Programming Principles

The Aspirations Incubator's Fidelity and Accountability Framework outlines the fundamental program elements that each Partner will need to incorporate as they adapt the 10 Youth Programming Principles into their program design over the next six years. This framework lays out clearly defined targets for each of the 10 Principles and it establishes benchmarks for the Partners to meet the expectations of the Aspirations Incubator. In addition, each target has a corresponding timeline for when that Principle needs to be fully implemented. Although the targets and timelines may shift as we go through the next 6 years, we feel that we have built enough time, support and training into this process to help Partners reach success and meet the Aspirations Incubator's projected goals.



Principle	Fidelity and Accountability	Data Sources
<p>1. Design Intentional Program Delivery Systems for Long Term Engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• small, purposeful learning communities• multi-year, "step-ladder" program delivery system• middle school through high school graduation• reflects developmental needs and interests of adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Implement a six year progression program model• Work with a cohort of 10-20 students at each grade level• Work with first cohort of students starting no later than 7th grade. • Target 1: The program model is fully operational with 6 cohorts of students by 2022.•• Target 2: The program model will maintain a student retention rate of 75% by 2022.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Semi Annual Data Reports• Program Design Questionnaire• Don's Annual Assessment



Principle	Fidelity and Accountability	Data Sources
<p>2. Develop a Skilled Network of Caring Adults and Peer Mentors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recruit adult volunteers recruit cross-age mentors (young leaders) train mentors and volunteers to meet relational needs of local youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design and implement a mentor recruitment and training strategy for all programming Create a pathway to use cross-age mentors in programming Target: The program model maintains a 3 to 1 student to mentor ratio (including peer mentors) by 2021-22. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semi Annual Data Reports Program Design Questionnaire Don's Annual Assessment
<p>3. Apply a Comprehensive Approach to Youth Development Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> targeted, holistic youth development methods built into program help young people find success and navigate challenges focus on proven promotion, prevention and intervention strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program model explicitly incorporates the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> relational approaches that are preventative in nature evidence based prevention and intervention practices enrichment (promotion) activities to spark students' interests activities designed for each cohort based on aggregate-level data from the HSA targeted, holistic youth development methods based on the Clover Model <p>Target: Each aspect of the comprehensive approach is present and observable in the program model by 2020-21.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semi Annual Data Reports Program Design Questionnaire Don's Annual Assessment Fidelity Checklist Stakeholder Interviews 3 Site Observations



Principle	Fidelity and Accountability	Data Sources
<p>4. Create a Community Support Network</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> assemble support networks for young people partner with parents, schools, key stake holders, health services etc. build high-level supports to meet needs of students (academic and non-academic) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each program builds partnerships with the following community sectors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family members of each student in the program Organizations offering support services to young people ages 13-22 years old School personnel (e.g., counselors, administrators, teachers) at middle school and high school levels Local police departments and other government agencies Target: Key Program Staff have routine contact with at least one member of each community sector to help meet the needs of students, by 2019-20. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semi Annual Data Reports Program Design Questionnaire Don's Annual Assessment Stakeholder Interviews
<p>5. Prioritize Informal Relationship Building with Youth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> interact with young people outside of regular scheduled programming outreach in the community built into program maintain relational links even when core programs not in session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program Manager interacts with students outside of regular scheduled programming Program Manager uses individual-level data provided by HSA to inform outreach practices Each student in the cohort has an individual outreach plan <p>Target 1: The Program Manager spends at least 20% of time per week interacting with students outside of regular programming by 2018-19.</p> <p>Target 2: The Program Manager uses HSA data and individual growth plans to inform and instruct one-on-one outreach strategies with students by 2020-21.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semi Annual Data Reports Program Design Questionnaire Don's Annual Assessment Stakeholder Interviews



Principle	Fidelity and Accountability	Data Sources
<p>6. Expand Worldviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> introduce students to diversity (people, cultures, places and natural resources) experiential, travel-based or outdoor educational opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program model explicitly incorporates the following experiential learning opportunities for students to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> go outside the boundaries of their own community meet and interact with people of different cultures have experiential, travel-based or outdoor educational opportunities at least once per year Experiences include mentors (peer mentors and caring adults) <p>Target 1: Each aspect of experiential learning is present in the design of the program model by 2017-18.</p> <p>Target 2: Each aspect of experiential learning is observable in the implementation of the program model by 2019-20.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semi Annual Data Reports Program Design Questionnaire Don's Annual Assessment



Principle	Fidelity and Accountability	Data Sources
<p>7. Embrace Student Voice and Choice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> shared power with students students have input into educational process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Each program model offers opportunities for each student's voice to be heard, respected and valued by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turning over parts of the educational process to students Letting students design elements of the program Allowing students to create the policies that govern the program <p>Target 1: Each aspect of student voice and choice is present in the design of the program model by 2017-18.</p> <p>Target 2: Each aspect of student voice and choice is observable in the implementation of the program model by 2019-20.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semi Annual Data Reports Program Design Questionnaire Don's Annual Assessment Stakeholder Interviews Student Surveys
<p>8. Encourage Civic Responsibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> incorporate service into curriculum design enhance civil discourse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least annually, each program model and curriculum offers students the opportunities to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> experience civic engagement, service learning or community service engage in conversations that enhance civil discourse <p>Target 1: Each aspect of civic responsibility is present in the design of the program model by 2017-18.</p> <p>Target 2: Each aspect of civic responsibility is observable in the implementation of the program model by 2019-20.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Semi Annual Data Reports Program Design Questionnaire Don's Annual Assessment



Principle	Fidelity and Accountability	Data Sources
<p>9. Prepare Students for Success after High School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase opportunities for youth to identify, explore and cultivate future aspirations • hands-on experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least annually, each program model and curriculum offers students the opportunities for students to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ identify, explore and cultivate future aspirations ○ have hands on experiences in professional settings • • Target 1: Each aspect of preparing students for success is present in the design of the program model by 2017-18. • • Target 2 Each aspect of preparing students for success is observable in the implementation of the program model by 2021-22. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi Annual Data Reports • Program Design Questionnaire • Don's Annual Assessment • Stakeholder Interviews • Student Surveys



Principle	Fidelity and Accountability	Data Sources
<p>10. Utilize Validated Assessment Tools to Promote Social-Emotional Development in Young People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collect social-emotional development and resiliency data • inform individual intervention strategies and influence programming • detect (and address) barriers to academic achievement (see #3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students who participate in the program take the Holistic Student Assessment each year • Aggregate-level and individual-level data are used to inform programming and intervention and prevention strategies (see also #3) • Design targeted, holistic youth development methods into the program offerings based on the Clover Model (see also #3) • <p>Target 1: At least 90% of students in the program participate in the HSA each year, starting in 2017-18.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • Target 2: Program Managers participate in at least 2 HSA coaching sessions per year, starting in 2018-19. <p>Target 3: Each aspect of promoting social-emotional development is present in the design of the program model by 2018-19 (see also #3).</p> <p>Target 4: Each aspect of promoting social-emotional development is observable in the implementation of the program model by 2020-21 (see also #5).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi Annual Data Reports • HSA and HSA-R Data • Program Design Questionnaire • Don’s Annual Assessment • Stakeholder Interviews • •

Appendix C: Holistic Student Assessment Details

The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) is designed to assess students' social-emotional development across 14 constructs that group into 3 categories of life skill (listed below). It consists of 61 questions on which students self-report using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Almost Always." The Holistic Student Assessment- Retrospective (HSA-RSC) is an end-of-the-year self-report which contains the same items as the HSA. However, it asks respondents to report the extent to which they believe that their thoughts and feelings have changed since beginning the program. Students respond using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Much less now" to "Much more now" with "No change" as the mid-point.

Resiliencies

Action Orientation: Engagement in physical and hands-on activities.

Emotional Control: Self-regulation of distress and management of anger.

Assertiveness: Confidence in putting oneself forward, advancing personal beliefs, wishes or thoughts, and in standing up for what one believes.

Trust: Perception of other people as helpful and trustworthy.

Empathy: Recognition of other's feelings and experiences.

Reflection: Inner thought processes and self-awareness, and internal responsiveness toward broader societal issues.

Optimism: Enthusiasm for and hopefulness about one's life.

Relationships

Relationship with Peers: Positive and supportive social connections with friends and classmates.

Relationship with Adults: Positive connections and attitudes toward interactions with adults.

Learning and School Engagement

Learning Interest: Desire to learn and acquire new knowledge.

Critical Thinking: Examination of information, exploration of ideas, and independent thought.

Perseverance: Persistence in work and problem solving despite obstacles.

Academic Motivation: Incentive to succeed in school, without necessarily including general interest in learning.

School Bonding: Positive personal connections and the sense of belonging in one's school.

More information can be found at: <https://www.pearinc.org/>

Appendix D: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was developed by Robert Goodman, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, to provide an initial, brief behavioral screen for 11-16 year olds. It is a self-report inventory that assesses positive and negative aspects of behavior and indicates whether additional or preliminary clinical interventions are needed. The SDQ is an independent questionnaire that complements the HSA to lend additional insights. The content areas are described in more detail below.

Hyperactivity/Inattention: Checks for any possible indications of ADHD or ADD, looks for hyperactivity, difficulty staying still and concentration levels.

Conduct Problems: Checks for conduct disorders, whether the respondent is able to control his temper, has aggressive or violent tendencies, and whether he violates others or social norms.

Emotional Symptoms: Checks for any possible emotional disorders, such as depression or anxiety, or simply indicates if the respondent is experiencing emotional difficulties.

Peer Problems: Checks for social difficulties, whether the respondent feels she is able to interact with her peers, and if she feels she is liked and appreciated.

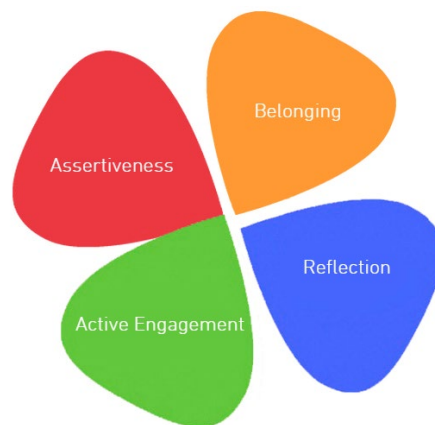
Pro-social: Checks for general and positive social skills, perspective taking, empathy, kindness and sociability.

More information can be found at: <http://sdqinfo.org/>

Appendix E: The Clover Model of Youth Development

Through many years of research and practical experience, Dr. Gil Noam and PEAR have developed the Clover Model. The model is called Clover to convey growth, luck, nurturance, and balance. It is a framework that helps us understand human developmental needs. It establishes a common language that can be used to communicate the strengths and challenges of children and youth. The Clover Model highlights four essential elements that people of all ages need in order to thrive, learn, and develop.

- The **Active Engagement** leaf represents body, impulse, and movement. Active Engagement is about connecting to the world physically. All young people have growing bodies, and everyone needs to live in and use their bodies.
- The **Assertiveness** leaf represents voice, choice, and executive function. It is about self-control, negotiating rules, roles, and boundaries, making decisions for oneself and having the capacity to act. All humans feel the need to affect and influence the world around them.
- The **Belonging** leaf describes the need for friendship, empathy, and support. This leaf is about strong, positive relationships with peers and adults, mentorship and group acceptance and identity. Humans live in a society, and belonging to a society is important to all people.
- The **Reflection** leaf describes the need for thought, analysis, insight, observation, and understanding. This leaf is about giving self-discovery and meaning-making. It involves making sense of one's own experiences, emotions and thoughts to create a sense of identity. Humans are conscious creatures; many philosophers have argued that the ability to reflect is what makes humans unique.



The model is about balance between the four leaves. While many individuals tend to specialize in a specific leaf, we each possess all the leaves to a greater or lesser degree and our tendencies may shift over our lifetimes. People specialized in one leaf often demonstrate particular strengths and struggles. Striving for personal balance between the four leaves of the Clover can help adults and students achieve positive mental health. Clover is helpful in identifying the basic needs that kids have. By designing programs accordingly so each one of these gets nourished and children can work towards their own personal Clover balance, children are healthier mentally, emotionally, and academically.