

ASPIRATIONS INCUBATOR: Year 5 Evaluation Report

February 2023



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This report was developed for the Rural Futures Fund'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, February 2023.

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Acknowledgements: The authors gratefully wish to thank the Aspirations Incubator Program Managers for their tireless efforts to collect data for this evaluation, as well as the community members, organizational leadership, and youth who have participated in interviews, surveys, and focus groups over the past five years.

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

Small towns and cities have many advantages, but they can also be isolating — places where young people may find it a challenging to earn a living. While Maine’s high school graduation rate is high, educational attainment beyond high school falls well below the national average, holding many young people back – especially those from rural areas – and limiting their future opportunities for good paying jobs and fulfilling careers. The Emanuel and Pauline A. Lerner Foundation (now known as the Rural Futures Fund, RFF) created the Aspirations Incubator in 2017 to meet this challenge.

The Aspirations Incubator is a six-year pilot initiative invested in strategic capacity building for five youth development organizations and their school district partners dispersed across rural Maine, including: Chewonki and RSU #1 in Bath; University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond and SAD #44 in Bethel; The Game Loft and RSU #3 in Thorndike; the EdGE program of Maine Seacoast Mission and SAD #37 in Cherryfield; and Old Town/Orono YMCA and RSU #34 in Old Town.

Grounded in the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, the Aspirations Incubator invests targeted resources to provide long-term, comprehensive mentoring programming to youth. This structured yet flexible program model aims to increase resilience and introduce new opportunities to small groups or “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 Rural Futures Fund contracted with the Data Innovation Project to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year implementation and outcomes evaluation. This report presents findings from the fifth year of the initiative and covers the areas of program enrollment, implementation, participants’ self-reported outcomes, and school data.

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 participants experience positive outcomes. In this report six data sources were used: key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, and school personnel; semi-annual site reports; a questionnaire on social-emotional development for children and adolescents developed by PEAR¹; supplemental student experience surveys after 8th and 10th grades; attendance rates; and academic achievement scores on standardized tests.

Key Findings

This report compiles data collected in the **fifth year** of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation, covering the 2021-2022 school year and the summer of 2022. The following represent the observations and outcomes after five years of program implementation.

¹ Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR). <https://www.pearinc.org/>

Participants and Emerging Outcomes

After five years of programming, the Aspirations Incubator sites have served over 400 young people from Maine's rural communities. Cohorts have been fairly evenly split between male and female participants, with some variations by site and year. Cohort 5, which was recruited during Year 5, had the largest proportion of participants who identified as nonbinary. The majority of participants identified as White (84%), followed by more than one race (8%, frequently White and American Indian). Fifty-seven percent of participants surveyed (grades 8 and 10) said someone from their immediate family had a college degree. Although student attrition was fairly high during COVID-19, it appears to have stabilized in the second half of this program year. Although 10th graders may not have made substantial gains in many key areas when compared to their 8th grade selves, they did not backslide; indeed, *maintenance* over the course of the pandemic should be interpreted positively.

Across all cohorts and sites, participants presented a number of strength and challenge areas at program initiation (based on self-assessment), averaging 3.6 strength areas and 3.8 challenge areas. After participating in the program, participants exhibit the following outcomes:

- **Relationships:** The majority of participants reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships in the past year as a result of the program; this was particularly true for peer relationships. Among 8th graders, 89% agreed that the program had helped them to feel connected to their community, and 77% said they have people to talk with when they feel lonely. The 10th graders reported maintaining the patterns of connection they reported in 8th grade.
- **Resilience and Social-Emotional Skills:** At least 70% of participants in each cohort reported positive growth on three measures of resilience. The overwhelming majority of 8th graders reported that the program helped them learn to express their needs (73%), make concrete plans (84%), stay level-headed (88%), talk to others (88%), and understand their own strengths (96%), a trend consistent with earlier years. Among 10th graders, although the responses were slightly less positive, we generally see them maintaining their earlier responses, with the notable exception in rating their own self-satisfaction.
- **Expanded Worldview and Experiences:** Most 8th graders reported that the program helped them to experience new places (93%) and accept people who are different (96%); most also said they try new things even when they are not sure about them (93%) and try to understand another person's point of view (84%). Among 10th graders, similar patterns persisted, with 98% reporting that they are willing to try new things and 96% accepting those who are different; these did not change notably from their previous 8th grade responses.
- **Learning, School Engagement, and Aspirations:** Over 70% of participants reported experiencing positive growth on measures related to critical thinking, learning interest, and academic motivation over Year 5; in addition, AI participants were less likely to be chronically absent (that is, missing 18 or more days of school in a year) compared with their peers, and somewhat more likely to meet or exceed academic expectations for English and Mathematics.
- **Aspirations:** Among 8th graders, 98% said it was sort of or very true that they would finish high school, and 88% said they would attend college. This was slightly lower than previous cohorts. The 10th graders showed little change in college-going aspirations compared to their previous 8th grade responses. Additionally, 88% somewhat or strongly agreed that the program helped them consider their future career goals, and 74% somewhat or strongly agreed that it helped them explore going to college.

Recommendations

When looking ahead to the final year of the Aspirations Incubator, the evidence continues to grow that participants experience real and measurable benefits from being part of an Aspirations Incubator program, particularly as the programs move away from the longer-term effects of the pandemic. The following recommendations should be considered as the Aspirations Incubator navigates the final year of program implementation.

For AI Organizations and Programs

- **Recommendation 1: Continue the “return to normal.”** The latter half of Year 5 marked a notable difference in the ability of programs to engage with and retain participants. While AI sites focus on returning to their planned programming, they should continue to reflect on addressing the lingering impacts that may affect enrollment, retention and engagement, the needs of their cohorts, and what this means for programming. Of note, trips emerged as critical to both keeping participants engaged and spurring personal growth.
- **Recommendation 2. Continue to build social-emotional skills and resilience.** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth mental health and well-being has been well-documented. Indeed, the measures associated with resilience and well-being were areas of somewhat lower growth for participants in the past year. In the final program year, Program Managers should continue working with participants and cohorts to explicitly name strength or challenge areas, and building intentional programming to support this growth, with support and coaching from RFF.
- **Recommendation 3: Provide more opportunities to connect with adult mentors.** Adult relationships was another area of comparatively lower growth across all the cohorts. This was reflected on the student surveys as well, where very few talked about connecting with adult mentors. However, in the second half of the year, AI sites reported involving more adult mentors than any other period. Efforts to recruit and engage adult mentors should continue as a priority in the final year.
- **Recommendation 4: Continue to address college aspirations.** College aspirations remained stable over the past year, with Cohort 4 reporting slightly higher college aspirations than the two cohorts before them, and participants in Cohort 2 showing no change in college aspirations. Nevertheless, Aspirations Incubator programs need to continue to address aspirations by exposing participants to college opportunities, discussing career and education goals, and addressing concerns about the transition to a new experience. The Rural Futures Fund can support Aspirations Incubator sites by providing access to information, expertise, resources, and cross-site discussions.

For the Rural Futures Fund

- **Recommendation 1: Focus on collective sustainability.** The longer-term sustainability of the AI cannot be the responsibility of a single program, Program Manager, nor organization. In the final year, in its role as convenor, the Rural Futures Fund should prompt sites to specifically consider longer-term sustainability and planning of their individual programs, as well as explore how the AI sites can collectively support each other towards sustainability. Identifying the areas in which RFF can continue to support AI sites (e.g., coaching), and where it cannot (e.g., program funding), is a good first step.
- **Recommendation 2: Identify how AI fits into the post-COVID policy and funding landscape.** The current policy and funding landscape has shifted dramatically since the start of the AI program in 2017 in the wake of COVID-19. The State of Maine is funding student aspirations and higher education in unprecedented ways, and the UMaine System is willing to support students differently, including AI participants. In the upcoming months, the RFF should engage in a strategic review of policy and funding streams, and identify new opportunities to support this work.

Introduction

Small towns and cities have many advantages, but they can also be isolating – places where young people may find it challenging to earn a living or see a future for themselves. While Maine’s high school graduation rate is high, educational attainment beyond high school falls well below the national average, holding many young people back – especially those from rural areas – and limiting their future opportunities for good paying jobs and fulfilling careers. Middle schoolers 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.² Programs that offer middle schoolers 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.³ While more than half of all school-aged children in Maine live in rural areas, many rural middle schoolers lack access to important resources that develop leadership skills and broaden their sense of what is possible. Moreover, the 2021 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey shows that 48% of high schoolers in Maine did not feel like they matter to people in their community, and this tended to be greater in more rural counties.⁴ And yet, the same survey also finds that protective factors, such as supportive relationships and caring environments, can help young people to feel safe and enhance their resilience.⁵

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 and Pauline A. Lerner Foundation (now known as the Rural Futures Fund, RFF) decided to focus its resources on raising the aspirations of middle schoolers in rural Maine. In 2017, the Rural Futures Fund announced the Aspirations Incubator, a six-year pilot initiative to build the capacity of a carefully selected group 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 growing up in rural Maine communities and introducing them to new opportunities that exist outside the focus of their everyday lives.

The Aspirations Incubator is rooted in the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, developed by Trekkers, a youth serving organization based in Rockland, Maine, whose mission is to cultivate the inherent strengths of young people through the power of long-term mentoring relationships. The Trekkers model is evidence-based and has made a difference in the lives of hundreds of young people growing up in the small fishing communities of Midcoast Maine. The Trekkers Principles are unique in their design because they focus on a continuous, long-term mentoring model that spans six years. The Rural Futures Fund

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ For more information about the MIYHS, please visit: <https://data.mainepublichealth.gov/miyhs/home>

⁵ Tinkham, K. (2020) *Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth*. Maine Resilience Building Network. Accessed 3/1/2021: <https://maineresilience.org/resources/Documents/MaineResilienceBuildingNetworkCultivatingMatteringforMaineYouthWhitePaper.pdf>

selected Trekkers to be the model program for the Aspirations Incubator initiative based on its solid record of participants 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 Trekkers Principles. More information about the Trekkers Principles can be found on the Trekkers Training Institute website: www.trekkersinstitute.org.

Aspiration Incubator Sites

Table 1 presents the Aspirations Incubator grantees who delivered programming in Year 5.

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.
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	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

Purpose of this Report

The Rural Futures Fund has contracted with the Data Innovation Project (DIP) to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year evaluation of the Aspirations Incubator. This annual evaluation report shares the significant themes that emerged from Year 5 of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot program (September 2021 to August 2022).

The multi-year evaluation 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 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 5, the Aspirations Incubator sites have one year remaining in the six-year timeline. The report presents a snapshot of this fifth year in terms of program enrollment, implementation and participant's self-reported outcomes using information gathered from the following sources: 10 semi-annual site reports; 18 key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, and school personnel; data from 56 8th grade surveys and 50 10th grade surveys; annual data from a self-report measure of social-emotional development for 220 Aspirations Incubator participants; and data provided by participating schools related to attendance rates and academic achievement on standardized tests. More information on the data sources and the analysis methods can be found in Years 1-3 Full Evaluation Report.⁶

The first section of the report presents the findings related to program participation and enrollment. This is followed by a description of the participants, and then focuses on participant outcomes. The final section includes recommendations for the final year of programming.

⁶ <https://www.aspirationsincubator.org/the-results>

Program Implementation

Return to “Normal”

A common refrain from program staff this year is that they were finally able to run their program as planned (at least mostly as planned) for the first time since the pandemic began. They also posited that this “return” subsequently improved retention, which is supported by the data: there were 34 withdrawals reported from September 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022, and only 10 withdrawals reported from April 1, 2022, to September 1, 2022.

Enrollment and Retention

Long-term engagement is central to the Aspirations Incubator program model. Program sites work with small groups or “cohorts” of 10-20 participants each year, starting in 7th grade and progressing through high school graduation. This means that a student who starts in 7th grade stays in the program for six years. It also means that sites have added a new cohort of 7th graders each year since 2017. By the end of the 2021-2022 program year, each site was expected to be supporting five cohorts (Table 2). Most sites begin recruiting a new cohort in the fall, select participants by December, and begin programming by mid-January/February.

Table 2. Grade Level of Each Cohort in Year 5

Cohort Number	Current Grade Level
Cohort 1	11 th Grade
Cohort 2	10 th Grade
Cohort 3	9 th Grade
Cohort 4	8 th Grade
Cohort 5	7 th Grade

Aspiration Incubator sites enrolled 69 new 7th graders into Cohort 5 in Year 5, which is similar to the previous year (73). In total, AI programs have enrolled **428** young people, which includes those enrolled with a cohort initially and participants who joined after 7th grade. When looking at enrollment by gender (Table 2), Cohort 1 was more evenly split between male and female participants, Cohorts 2 and 3 had slightly more females than males, and Cohort 4 was much more skewed towards females (61%). Cohort 5 was more balanced between male and female participants than Cohort 4. Although not shown in Table 3, it also had the largest proportion of participants who identified as nonbinary compared to the prior cohorts. There was some variation by site in each year, and I Know ME consistently had more male than female participants in their first three cohorts, but the proportion flipped for Cohorts 4 and 5.

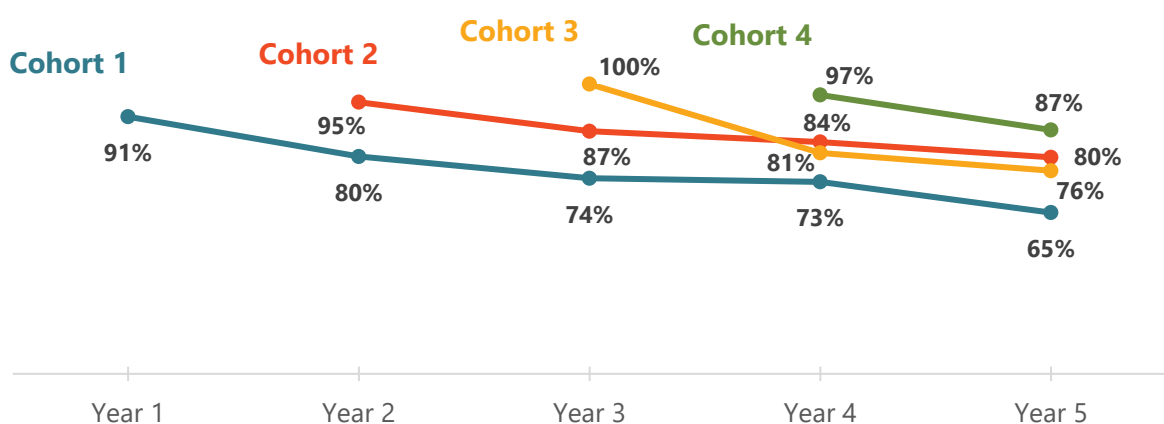
Table 3. Initial Program Enrollment, by Cohort and Male/Female Gender⁷

Program	Cohort 1		Cohort 2		Cohort 3		Cohort 4		Cohort 5	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
I Know ME	100%	0%	60%	40%	73%	27%	25%	75%	38%	50%
Journey	27%	73%	35%	65%	54%	46%	25%	75%	20%	73%
North Star	43%	57%	33%	67%	38%	62%	60%	40%	58%	33%
River Runners	41%	59%	42%	58%	24%	76%	41%	59%	33%	61%
Waypoint	63%	37%	50%	50%	50%	50%	42%	58%	56%	44%
All Sites	51%	49%	46%	54%	46%	54%	39%	61%	41%	54%

⁷ 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.

Five years into the program, most sites and cohorts are meeting the fidelity target of maintaining a 75% retention rate (Table 4, following page). When looking at the total retention rate by cohort and year, we see that rates do decrease year-to-year and fall as low as 65% for Cohort 1 in Year Five (Figure 1). All cohorts experienced some attrition from Year 4 to Year 5. Cohort 4 experienced the most precipitous decline, 10 percentage points, although a substantial decrease from 7th to 8th grade seems to be consistent with earlier cohorts. This is likely a normal sequence in group forming and norming, where interested participants learn first-hand what the program is like and decide whether it is a good fit for them.

Figure 1. Overall Retention Rates, by Cohort and Year



Overall, Year 5 proved to be another tough year for attrition with 44 participants leaving the program, although the loss of participants stabilized from grant reporting in April 2022 (34 withdrawn) to September 2022 (10 withdrawn). The primary reasons for student departures shifted slightly from those listed during peak COVID years. The most common reason mentioned by program managers were that young people moved outside of their service region. Some of these moves were likely rooted in COVID-related disruptions to local housing markets. NorthStar, based in Bethel, Maine, was particularly impacted by this phenomenon.

The second most common reason for withdrawing was some combination of having too many other commitments (sports, other extracurriculars) and shifting priorities away from attending an AI program. This was more common among older cohort members. Similar to this reason, a few program managers mentioned that some participants realized the program was not the right “fit” for them and chose to withdraw. A few programs also said social dynamics played a role in their program attrition, where friendship groups shifted outside of the program and motivated some participants to leave. Lastly, on a tragic note, one program experienced its first student death, which of course reduced the size of that group, among many other lasting impacts.

“[O]ur retention rates plummeted! Out of the nine students who “withdrew” this period, only three decided to do so.... Housing shortages and ongoing complications from the COVID pandemic have affected the other six students.”

PROGRAM MANAGER

**Table 4. Program Flow at the End of Year 5,
by Cohort and Site**

	Initial Cohort	Joined After Initial Cohort Began	Withdrew	Retention
Cohort 1				
I Know ME	10	0	1	90%
Journey	15	0	1	93%
NorthStar	14	5	8	58%
River Runners	17	7	6	75%
Waypoint	20	5	17	32%
Total	76	17	33	65%
Cohort 2				
I Know ME	10	2	3	75%
Journey	17	1	2	89%
NorthStar	13	3	4	75%
River Runners	18	5	1	96%
Waypoint	20	5	9	64%
Total	78	16	19	80%
Cohort 3				
I Know ME	11	0	1	91%
Journey	13	10	2	91%
NorthStar	8	5	5	62%
River Runners	21	1	5	77%
Waypoint	20	3	9	61%
Total	73	19	22	76%
Cohort 4				
I Know ME	8	2	2	80%
Journey	12	3	1	93%
NorthStar	11	4	1	93%
River Runners	17	3	2	90%
Waypoint	19	0	4	79%
Total	67	12	10	87%
Cohort 5				
I Know ME	8	0	2	75%
Journey	15	0	0	100%
NorthStar	12	0	0	100%
River Runners	18	1	2	89%
Waypoint	16	0	1	94%
Total	69	1	5	93%

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

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 Trekkers 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 following sections describe the first five cohorts and present evidence of short-term gains observed after the fifth year of program implementation. The data primarily represent a point-in-time snapshot of each cohort who are at different points within the program, as well as a pre-post analysis of Cohort 2 from their 8th grade to 10th grade years.

Student Characteristics

In Year 5, 250 participants completed the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) at the start of the programming. 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. The HSA is also 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. More information about the HSA and how it is used by programs can be found in the appendices of the Years 1-3 Full Evaluation Report.⁸ Across all cohorts and sites, participants presented a number of strength and challenges, averaging 3.6 strength areas and 3.8 challenge areas. The most frequent student strengths were empathy (31%), emotional control (25%), action orientation (23%) and trust (20%). The most common challenge areas were assertiveness (26%), optimism (26%), perseverance (21%), and reflection (20%).

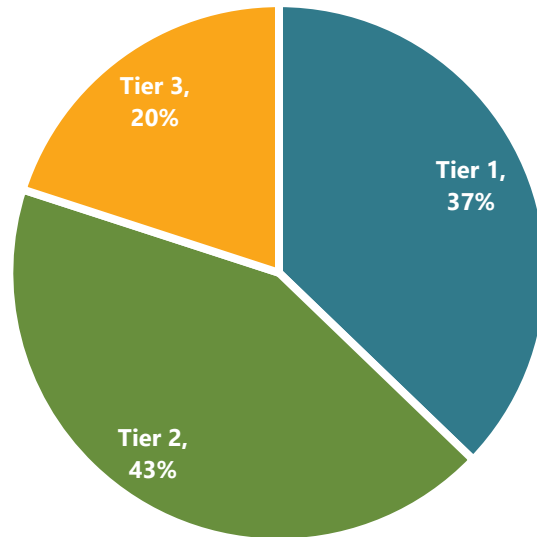
STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

- 266 students participated in the AI program across five sites.
- For those who completed the HSA assessment, (250), 52% identified as girls and 47% as boys.
- 8% of students (21) chose not to disclose their race or ethnicity.
- Among those who did disclose:
 - 84% White
 - 8% More than one race
 - 2% American Indian
 - 7% African American, Asian, Latino or something else “not listed.”
- 57% of student survey respondents said someone from their immediate family had a college degree.

⁸ <https://www.aspirationsincubator.org/the-results>

The strengths and challenges reported by participants relate to their levels of needed supports, also called “Tiers;” Tier 1 participants are in need of low levels of support and Tier 3 are in need of high levels. As shown in Figure 2, most participants were in need of Tier 2, or a moderate level of supports (43%) at the start of Year 5, followed by Tier 1 (37%) and then Tier 3 (20%).

Figure 2. Level of Support Needs at the Start of Year 5 (N= 250)



Student Outcomes

The following section discusses the evidence of positive student outcomes at the conclusion of Year 5, with the following notable highlights. One limitation to keep in mind when reviewing the 8th and 10th grade survey results is that the information was collected in May and June, *before* any summer programming had occurred. Given that this was the first summer AI programs were able to execute their full summer programming since COVID began (which include excursions and overnight trips), the 8th and 10th grade survey results may be lower than we might have observed at the end of the summer.

- **Relationships:** The majority of participants reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships in the past year as a result of the program; this was particularly true for peer relationships. Among 8th graders, 89% agreed that the program had helped them to feel connected to their community, and 77% said they have people to talk with when they feel lonely. The 10th graders reported maintaining the patterns of connection they reported in 8th grade.
- **Resilience and Social-Emotional Skills:** At least 70% of participants in each cohort reported positive growth on three measures of resilience. The overwhelming majority of 8th graders reported that the program helped them learn to express their needs (73%), make concrete plans (84%), stay level-headed (88%), talk to others (88%), and understand their own strengths (96%), a trend consistent with earlier years. Among 10th graders, although the responses were slightly less positive, we generally see them maintaining their earlier responses, with the notable exception in rating their own self-satisfaction.
- **Expanded Worldview and Experiences:** Most 8th graders reported that the program helped them to experience new places (93%) and accept people who are different (96%); most also said they try new things even when they are not sure about them (93%) and try to understand another person's point of view (84%). Among 10th graders, similar patterns persisted, with 98% reporting that they are willing to try new things and 96% accepting those who are different; these did not change notably from their previous 8th grade responses.
- **Learning, School Engagement, and Aspirations:** Over 70% of participants reported experiencing positive growth on measures related to critical thinking, learning interest, and academic motivation over Year 5; in addition, AI participants were less likely to be chronically absent (that is, missing 18 or more days of school in a year) compared with their peers, and somewhat more likely to meet or exceed academic expectations for English and Mathematics.
- **Aspirations:** Among 8th graders, 98% said it was sort of or very true that they would finish high school, and 88% said they would attend college. This was slightly lower than previous cohorts. The 10th graders showed little change in college-going aspirations compared to their previous 8th grade responses. Additionally, 88% somewhat or strongly agreed that the program helped them consider their future career goals, and 74% somewhat or strongly agreed that it helped them explore going to college.

Sense of Belonging and Positive Relationships

The HSA-RSC asks participants 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 participants reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships each year. Figure 3 shows the percentage of participants in each cohort who reported that the program helped them to improve their relationships with adults and peers over the preceding year. At 88%, Cohort 5 showed the greatest improvements in terms of peer relationships, followed by Cohort 3 at 80%. Meanwhile, Cohort 1 showed the greatest improvements in terms of adult relationships (73%). Although not shown, girls were slightly less likely than boys to indicate growth in terms of their peer relationships (71% compared with 74%).

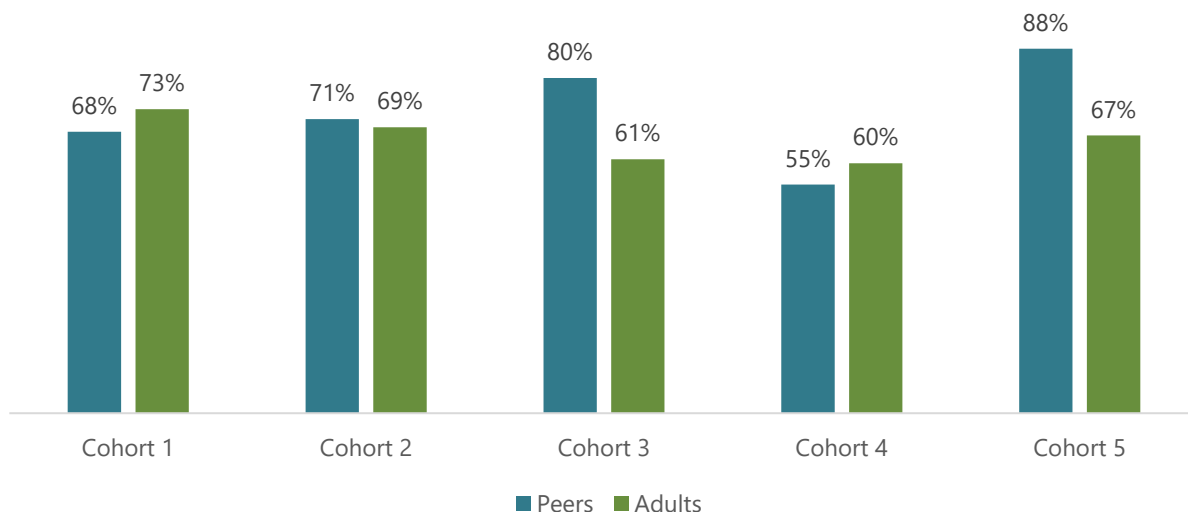
"This program affected me positively by allowing me to connect with people I otherwise wouldn't have."

8th GRADE STUDENT

In the student survey (Cohorts 2 and 4), youth shared various comments about their strengthened relationships with peers. One 8th grader shared, "Being in this program, has made me feel that I can be more open to my peers. Also has made me understand my community more. [sic]" Several 10th graders commented on how the program exposed them to peers they would not have interacted with otherwise. One student explained, "This program has affected me in several positive ways; I am way more open to hang around people who I normally wouldn't have beforehand..." Another student went further on to share that they had "...grown very important relationships throughout my years in the program."

Few participants explicitly noted adult relationships and those who did shared general positive comments about their program managers, such as "Lyndsey and Justin are awesome mentors." This is consistent with previous reports where participants think of their program managers as their mentors and are less inclined to see the other volunteer mentors in this way.

**Figure 3. Measures of Improved Relationships:
Percent of Students Reporting Positive Change at the Conclusion of the Year 5, by Cohort**



Connection to Community

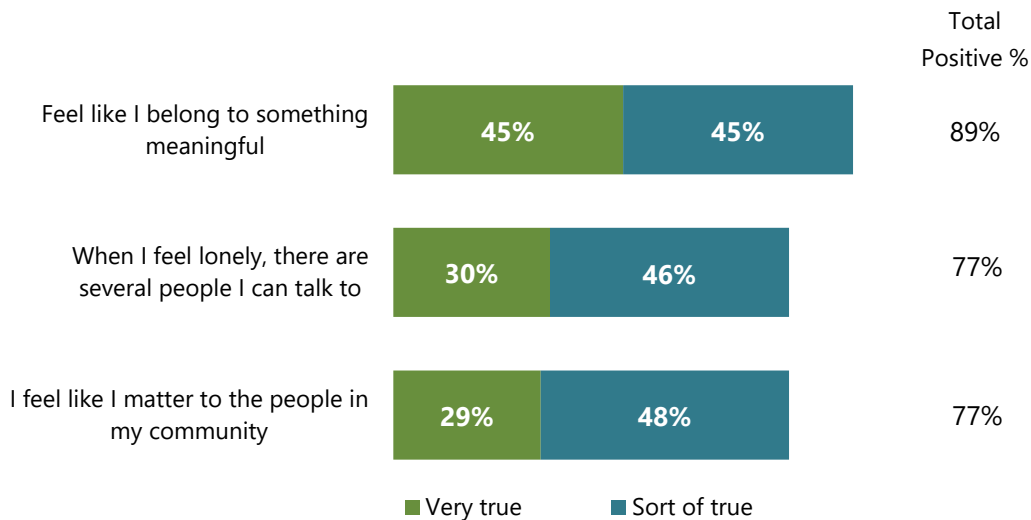
At the conclusion of their 8th grade year (Cohort 4), 93% of participants somewhat or strongly agreed that being in the program had helped them to feel connected to their community and 89% felt they belonged to something meaningful. In addition, as shown in Figure 4, 77% said it was sort of or very true that they have several people with whom to talk when they feel lonely, and that they feel like they matter to their community. It should be noted that the “very true” responses were lower, 30% and 29% respectively. As comparison, the 2021 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey found that only 53.6% of 8th graders in Maine agreed or strongly agreed that they matter to the people in their community.

“The program has helped me reach out to people in my community and make new friends and connections.”

8th GRADE STUDENT

Several 8th graders shared comments about how their Aspirations Incubator programs helped them connect to their communities. A couple of participants said the program helped them reach out to people in their communities in ways they would not have on their own. One of these 8th graders explained that this had given them “a new outlook on the community.” Another student shared that their program inspired them to volunteer in their community – in this case to start coaching youth cheering.

**Figure 4. Self-Reported Sense of Connection:
Cohort 4 at 8th Grade**



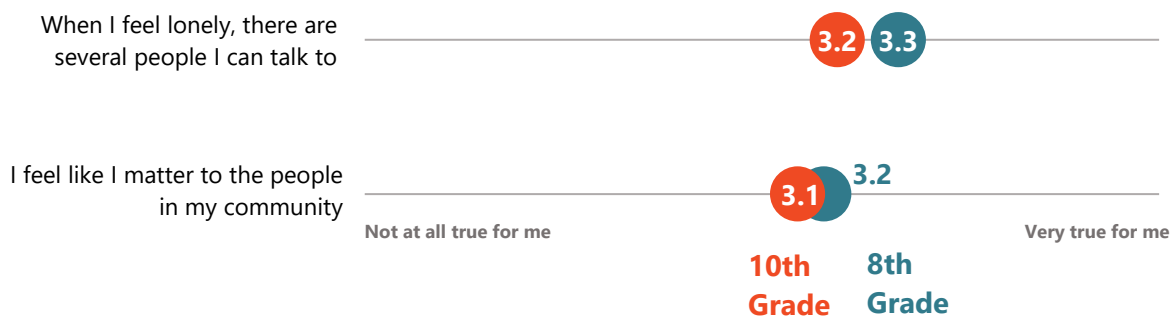
The 10th grade survey offered us the opportunity to match participants' responses to their 8th grade survey responses, which we successfully completed for 32 participants. Matching survey results in this manner allows us to use statistical tests to determine whether or not any observed differences were due to chance.⁹ This analysis revealed no significant changes in how participants responded to questions about connection, despite a slight drop in how much they agreed with the statements in 10th grade (Figure 5). This finding may indicate that the participants were generally maintaining the perceptions and opinions they reported in their previous 8th grade.

"I would recommend [the program] for any student who loves to get involved in their community and step up as a person."

10th GRADE STUDENT

Indeed, a few matched participants shared sentiments about how the program helped them get involved in their communities in tangible ways (versus the more abstract feelings of "connectedness"). For example, one wrote, "[it has] made me more active in my community and exposed me to different points of view."

**Figure 5. Changes in Self-Reported Sense of Connection:
Cohort 2 at 8th Grade and 10th Grade (n=32)**



⁹ In this case, we used a Paired Samples *t* Test to compare the aggregated average responses from each time period. Paired *t*-tests can only use cases that have non-missing values for both pre- and post- measures (32 cases).

Social-Emotional Skills and Resilience

Recall that the HSA-RSC asks participants 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 particular measures of social-emotional skills and resilience. As shown in Table 5, at least 70% of participants in each cohort reported experiencing positive growth in at least three areas of resilience, with all cohorts showing growth in Assertiveness, Empathy, and Reflection. Students were less likely to report growth in terms of Emotional Control and Trust; notably, these are both the areas where the fewest participants reported having challenges at the start of the year. Cohort 5 (7th grade) showed the most growth, meeting the 70% threshold in 6 of the 7 areas, followed by Cohorts 1 and 2 (11th and 10th grades). Cohort 4 (8th grade) showed the least amount of growth. Although not shown, there were a few differences between girls and boys. Some notable differences were that boys were more likely to improve in the areas of emotional control (63% compared with 54%) and trust (55% compared with 51%) while girls were more likely to improve in the areas of empathy (79% compared with 73%) and assertiveness (82% compared with 77%).

Table 5. Overall Resilience: Percent of Students Reporting Positive Change at the Conclusion of Year 5, by Cohort*

Resilience Factor	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Cohort 4	Cohort 5
Action orientation	70%	78%	83%	69%	93%
Emotional control	59%	53%	59%	45%	72%
Assertiveness	81%	82%	88%	75%	70%
Trust	54%	49%	51%	49%	62%
Empathy	76%	76%	73%	73%	82%
Reflection	70%	82%	76%	74%	80%
Optimism	76%	73%	68%	60%	70%

*Green text denotes meeting the 70% or above threshold.

Students' responses to the student survey provide additional insight into their assessment of their skills and behaviors. In terms of what they learned from the program, most 8th graders agreed or strongly agreed that they learned how to express their needs (73%), make concrete plans (84%), stay level-headed in stressful situations (88%), talk to others even when they disagree (88%), and understand their own strengths (96%) (Figure 6, following page). In addition, when asked how much certain characteristics were "true" for them, 88% said it was sort of or very true that they had a number of good qualities and 86% set long-term goals for themselves. Eighty percent knew how to calm down when they get upset and 66% were satisfied with themselves; 68% said they ask for help when they need it.

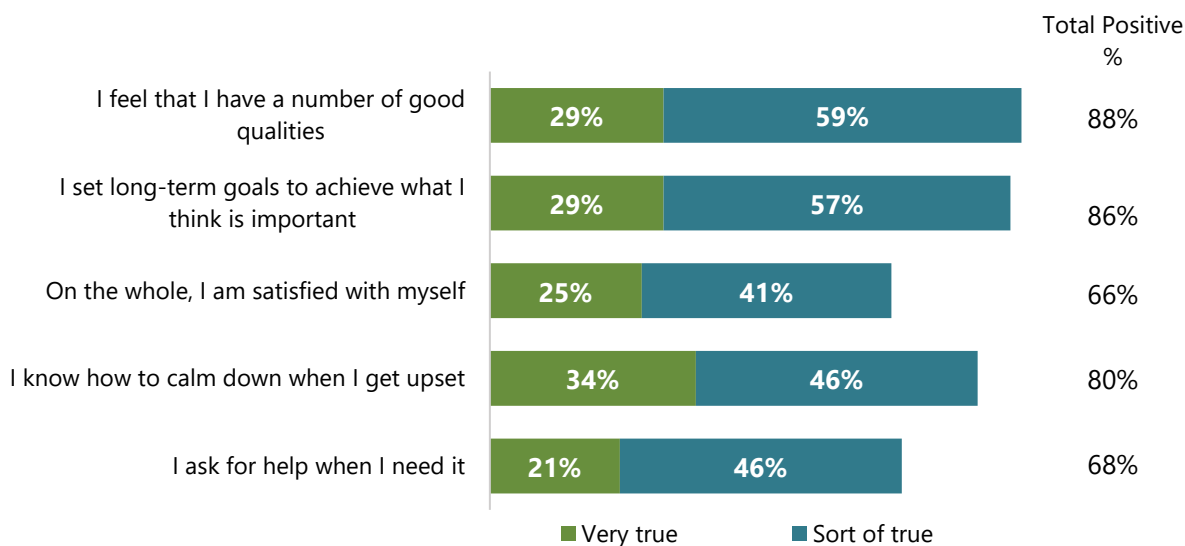
"I think I have been trying to be myself more since about when I joined [the program] and is one of the steps I took to get towards my goal."

8th GRADE STUDENT

When asked to reflect on how the program affected them, the 8th graders shared examples that touched on many facets of social and emotional learning. These areas of growth are summarized as follows:

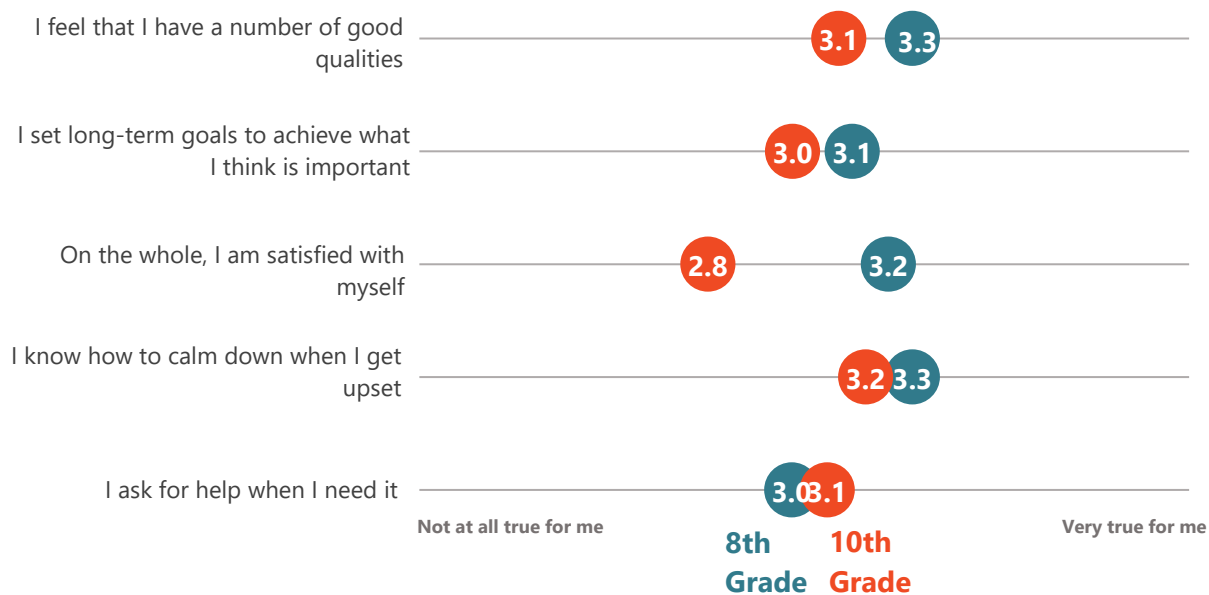
- **Improved mental and/or physical health.** A couple of participants said the program had improved their mental and/or physical health; sharing sentiments such as, “I have felt a lot better mentally and physically.”
- **Improved mood/outlook.** Several participants shared the program improved their mood or outlook in some way; they described feeling “more calm,” “more happy,” or having a “better outlook on life.”
- **Improved problem-solving abilities.** A couple of participants either directly said their problem-solving abilities had improved or described aspects of this improvement such as, being able to “think outside the box.”
- **Living more authentically.** One participant shared that the program had inspired them to live more authentically, they described this as “trying to be myself more.”
- **Asking for help/assertiveness.** One participant shared that they “feel more confident in asking for help.”

**Figure 6. Self-Reported Social-Emotional Skills:
Cohort 4 at 8th Grade**



Of the 50 10th grade survey respondents, about half shared some statement about how the program affected them on a social-emotional level. However, as shown in Figure 7, the matched comparison showed no significant changes in how this group (n=32) responded to questions about social-emotional learning. This means that the participants' increased or decreased agreement with the statements from 8th to 10th grade were likely due to chance. Again, one way to interpret the results is that these participants maintained their assessment of their skills and perceptions in 8th grade. One exception may be for the statement "on the whole, I am satisfied with myself," which had a more substantial decrease in agreement from 8th to 10th grade (from 3.22 to 2.75 ($p=0.057$)). This change was not statistically significant at the 0.05 alpha level, however, though it was very close to that cut off.

**Figure 7. Changes in Self-Reported Social-Emotional Skills:
Cohort 2 at 8th Grade and 10th Grade (n=32)**



The 10th graders described many ways being a part of the program developed their social-emotional skills and capacities. These areas include the following:

- **Social/relational skills.** Social or relational skills were the most common change listed by 10th graders. They described how the program made them “friendlier,” that it helped them “open up.” That it helped them get more comfortable with new people and experiences, and “grow socially.” One student wrote, “It has encouraged me to engage in a lot of different activities in social environments which helped me with my antisocial problem.”
- **Outgoingness.** Overlapping with social/relational skills, several participants said the program helped them be more outgoing and adventurous. One student wrote, “I am way more open to hang around people who I normally wouldn't have beforehand.”
- **Perception of self-value.** A common response from participants is that the program made them a “better person.” Unfortunately, given the limitations of a survey there is no way to explore this statement more with the participants – like what changes made them “better?” Did specific behaviors or perceptions change or did their general sense of worth increase?
- **Reflection/Self-knowledge.** Students directly and indirectly described a greater capacity to reflect on themselves and possess a stronger sense of self and self-knowledge. One student shared, “It's affected me in a way that sets me up for a better future plan and understanding myself more at the same time.” Other participants described their self-knowledge as a capacity to see and understand both their strengths and their weaknesses.

“I'm with people who all care for me and it's a safe environment where I can learn and take steps...”

10th GRADE STUDENT

“A lot of these kids were kids who really, I would say, had very little self-esteem when they were first involved in the program...[Now] these kids are going to be the movers and shakers of their class. They have lots of confidence. They are very outspoken. They're very positive kids, and I think they see the value of the efforts that have been made on their behalf, and they appreciate those.”

PRINCIPAL

Expanded Worldviews and Experiences

One of the goals of the program is to expose participants to a diversity of people, cultures, places, and experiences through experiential, travel-based or outdoor educational opportunities.

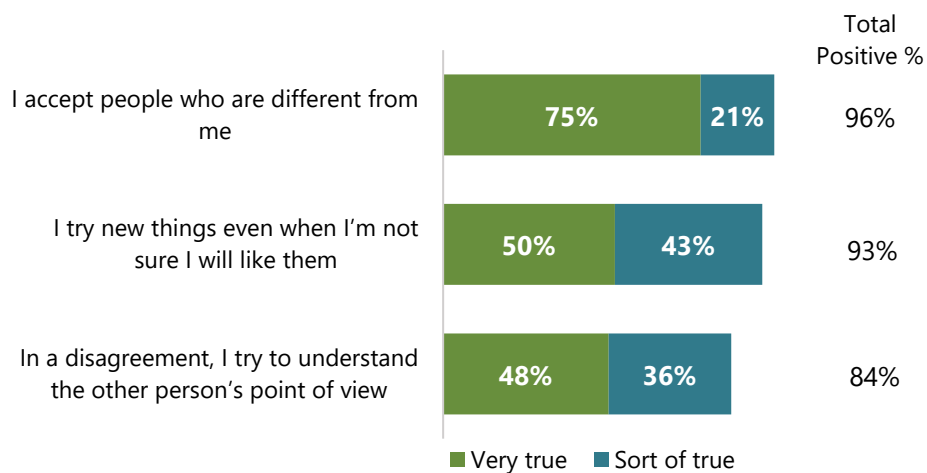
For the 8th graders this year, one of the strongest themes shared was around the way the program exposed them to new people and experiences. Most participants made a comment related to this theme, and 93% somewhat or strongly agreed that they experienced new places through their program. For example, one student wrote, “The program has made me able to experience things that I probably wouldn’t be able to.” A few participants used the word “explore,” which evokes a sense of newness and expansion. One student shared, “I think that being a part of the program has given me many new experiences and will give me lots of opportunities,” which implies that the expanded experiences reach into the future through expanded opportunities as well. A few 8th graders touched on another aspect of expanded worldviews – being challenged and pushed outside one’s comfort zone. Indeed, 93% reported that it was sort of or very true that they try new things even when they are not sure they will like them (Figure 8).

Another facet of this goal is to help participants become more inclusive and tolerant of diversity. In the survey, 96% of 8th graders reported that it was sort of or very true that they accept people who are different and 84% said they try to understand another person’s point of view in a disagreement (Figure 8). When asked to report whether they do various activities through their program, 79% somewhat or strongly agreed that they interact with people from different cultures.

“This program has made me step out of my comfort zone and do things I wouldn’t normally do.”

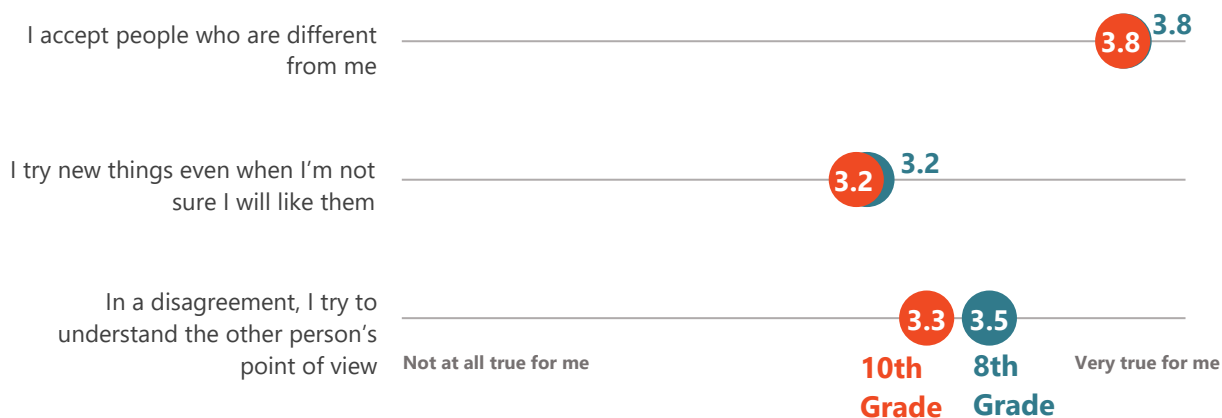
8th GRADE STUDENT

**Figure 8. Self-Reported Acceptance of Diversity:
Cohort 4 at 8th Grade (n=56)**



At the conclusion of their academic year, 98% of the 10th graders somewhat or strongly agreed that they experienced new places through their program. In the matched comparison, the participants maintained a high average agreement of 3.68 from 3.71 in 8th grade (out of a scale of 1-4). These participants' responses to "I accept people who are different from me" and "I try new things even when I'm not sure I will like them" maintained their averages from 8th to 10th grade, 3.84 to 3.84 and 3.19 to 3.16, respectively (Figure 9). There was a slight decline in average agreement with the statement "In a disagreement, I try to understand the other person's point of view," but the change was not statistically significant. This means the change is not substantial enough to rule out chance.

**Figure 9. Changes in Self-Reported Acceptance of Diversity:
Cohort 2 at 8th Grade and 10th Grade (n=32)**



Like the 8th graders this year, numerous 10th graders listed exposure to new places and experiences as the main way they were impacted by their program. There were several statements such as, "It's helped me experience new things and meet new people," or "It's given me many opportunities for things to do, to try, and to dip my toes into." A couple participants also connected this exposure to new things to shifts in their perspectives and outlook such as, "The program has changed the way I somewhat see the world," and "This program has given me new experiences, and different perspectives on things."

Speaking more to the goal of greater inclusion and tolerance of diversity, one student wrote, "...this program also has opened my eyes to so many new opinions and people," and another student said the program helped them explore "different cultures and different ways of life." This aligns with the 10th graders' high level of agreement, 96%, with the statement "I accept people who are different from me" (n=50). When asked to report whether they do various activities through their program, 70% somewhat or strongly agreed that they were able to interact with people from different cultures.

"This program has done so much for me! It has changed me as a person, for the better. It has given me so many opportunities that I never would have outside of the program. And this program also has opened my eyes to so many new opinions and people"

10th GRADE STUDENT

Several school personnel echoed this as the primary change and benefit of the AI programs to participants. One teacher who interacts with some AI participants said they had noticed changes among those participants. They shared, "I've seen a huge changes in students that I've had in the program since when they enrolled with us three years ago, and you know it's also because they started at 14 and now they are 16." This was a common caveat school personnel offered, but they always explained that exposing students to anything new was beneficial and something they would always support. One principal shared, "they [the program] provide some great opportunities for kids to do things that are outside of their comfort zone and widens their lens and gives them an opportunity to see some really good things in the world that they might not be able to see. I would imagine that that is contributing to some of that really positive growth."

The importance of excursions and overnight trips

Exposure to new places, experiences, and people is also a common outcome cited by program managers, program leaders, and other people involved in the programs (school personnel, mentors, etc.). This year in particular, programs were able to run more of these worldview-expanding experiences after COVID safety precautions lifted enough to allow overnight trips. Program managers said this return to normal programming had an enormous impact on participants' morale and how they engaged with the program. One program manager shared a story where a couple of her 9th graders were on the fence about staying in the program. She said that after their core trip in the summer, the participants texted her to say they were "definitely still in" and excited for the coming year.

Several program managers remarked on the changes they saw in their participants over these trips. One shared, "As a staff member, you can see that in four days more growth happens than in an entire year. So it just kind of solidifies how important it is to provide those opportunities for them to go explore in a different environment with their own peers and maybe participate in activities and explore places that they may not have had an opportunity to do before. And just have fun, and be kids, and giggle, and be silly and crazy."

Below is a sampling of some of the trips and excursions run by sites:

- **International trips to Canada (New Brunswick and Montreal).** One program manager noted, "The youth had a great time learning about other cultures, meeting the mayor of St John, and seeing the majestic cliffs of Fundy. For many of the youth who had never been outside the State let alone the country they were able to better see their home as after seeing somewhere else to compare it to and realize what makes Maine unique and special."
- **Camping trips to state and national parks, and private lands.** As one program manager explained, "Cohort Three, who were 9th graders, had never been on a camping trip before because of COVID. So they've now had multiple overnight excursions in the last year...it's on those overnight excursions where the magic group bonding stuff happens. I think that those are the most powerful things that we offer."

"So yeah, I would definitely say any campus tours, and anything out-of-state, has been huge in terms of opportunities for our kids, especially because we barely got to do anything together...I think that has really increased the value of these experiences for them now because they missed it for so long."

PROGRAM MANAGER

- **Out-of-state college campus tours.** Several programs ran college campus visits for their older participants. One program manager remarked that this had been the most impactful trips for them as a program manager, too. They explained, “It’s great to see how much the things we did really affected them, and the conversations they were having on their own, one on one about the trip. Some have learned about what kind of city they want to live in from the trips: New York City is too big and scary, Portland is too small and close, but Boston is great, for instance.”
- **Overnight trip to Portland, Maine, and Boston, Massachusetts.** This trip included a train ride from Portland to Boston. The program managers shared that the participants were “so excited” to ride the train. But more than that, “They were just so excited to have a trip like an actual trip. They haven’t...that particular cohort has not had a core trip since seventh grade... And they planned that whole trip, they choose every single historical place that we go to, and because they chose everything it was even more exciting for them because they wanted to go see it.”

Learning and School Engagement

Again, recall that the HSA-RSC asks participants 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. Table 6 shows the percentage of participants reporting positive growth on each of the individual measures related to learning and school engagement at the conclusion of Year 5 for each cohort. Students in each cohort were most likely to report positive growth in terms of Critical Thinking and Learning Interest and were least likely to show growth in terms of School Bonding (positive personal connections and the sense of belonging in one’s school). Because the AI is an out of school time program, these numbers are often the lowest in the mix of resilience factors, since participants do not necessarily link the program to their school environment. Boys were more likely to report growth in all these areas than girls, notably school bonding (60% compared with 50%), and critical thinking (90% compared with 82%).

**Table 6. Measures of Learning and School Engagement:
Percent of Students Reporting Positive Change at the Conclusion of Year 4, by Cohort***

Resilience Factor	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Cohort 4	Cohort 5
Learning Interest	81%	86%	80%	82%	75%
Critical Thinking	81%	86%	88%	84%	88%
Perseverance	73%	72%	78%	68%	78%
Academic Motivation	81%	86%	78%	71%	72%
School Bonding	59%	45%	66%	52%	53%

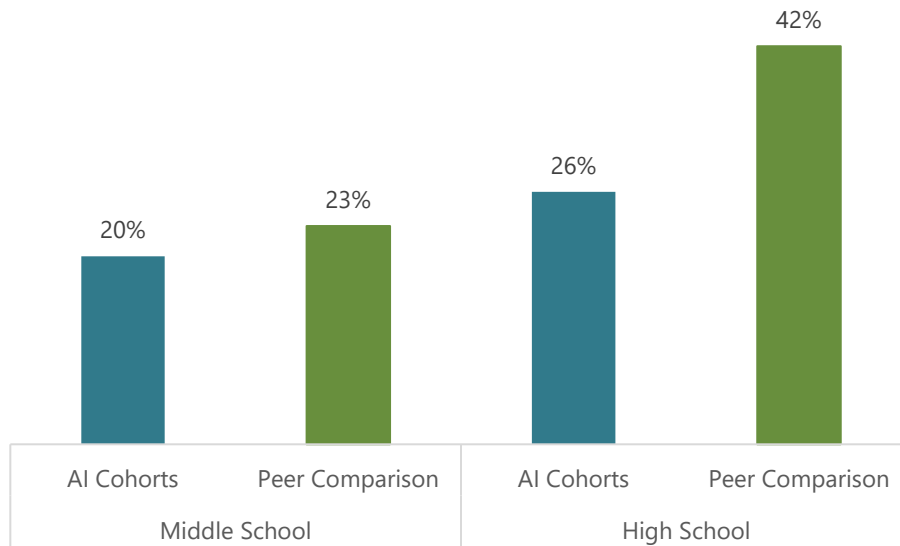
*Green text denotes meeting the 70% or above threshold.

In addition to the HSA-RSC indicators, the five remaining Aspirations Incubator sites were able to gather information about their cohorts from the participating schools for the 2021-2022 year regarding attendance and standardized testing results. The information was reliable for attendance and academic achievement across at least four of the five programs. Note that as part of the comparative analysis, we removed the Aspirations Incubator participants in each category for the aggregate school counts, which enabled us to compare Aspirations Incubator participants to their peers.

The data showed that many Aspirations Incubator participants were less likely to miss 18 or more days of school in a year compared with their peers (Figure 10, following page) particularly among the high school Cohorts (grades 9 through 11). The results suggest that being part of the Aspirations Incubator programs may help participants attend school somewhat more regularly compared with their peers. However, it is

difficult to control for the impact of COVID-19 and quarantine protocols on attendance. Were Aspirations Incubator participants more (or less) likely to attend school, or were they simply less (or more) affected by COVID illness and quarantine protocols than their peers?

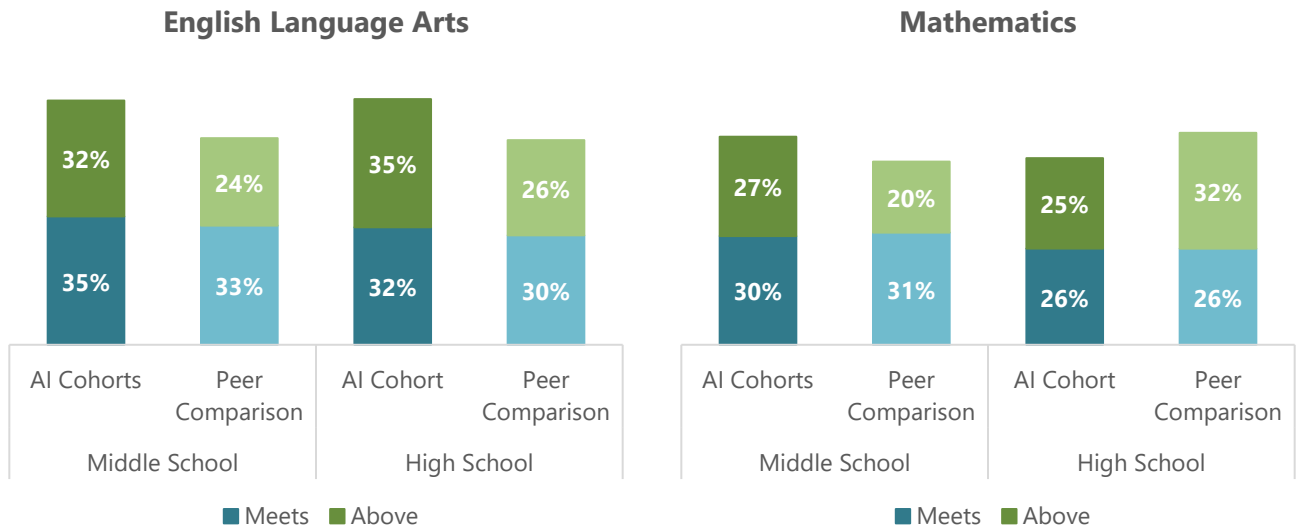
Figure 10. Percent of Students Missing 18+ Days: Aspirations Incubator Cohorts Compared to Peers



Academic achievement was reported using the Spring 2022 testing results. Schools indicated whether participants were exceeding or meeting expectations based on their test scores for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. School partners also provided the total number of students in each category for comparative purposes.

Figure 11 on the following page represents a snapshot of three cohorts in 2022 (two in middle school and one in high school) and shows that Aspirations Incubator participants were more likely to exceed expectations when compared with their peers, particularly in English Language Arts (ELA). For example, in both middle school and high school, about one-third of the AI participants exceeded expectations in English Language Arts (compared with one-quarter of their peers); Mathematics shows lower rates overall, and less notable differences between the AI cohorts and their peers. Without a baseline score prior to their engagement with the Aspirations Incubator it is hard to know whether the Aspirations Incubator participants were already more likely to score highly; however, it is important to keep in mind they were as likely as their peers to experience the negative impacts of COVID-19 on their learning.

Figure 11. Academic Achievement: Percent of Students Meeting or Above Expectations – Aspirations Incubator Cohorts in 2022 Compared to Peers



Aspirations

In terms of longer-term aspirations, the survey of 8th graders showed that most felt it was sort of or very true that they would finish high school (98%) and have a career (98%; Figure 12, following page). Fewer said it was sort of or very true that they would go to college, but it still remained high (88%). These rates of intention to complete high school and attend college are greater than the statewide rates of high school graduation and college initiation for Maine (86% in 200-21 and 54% in 2021, respectively).¹⁰

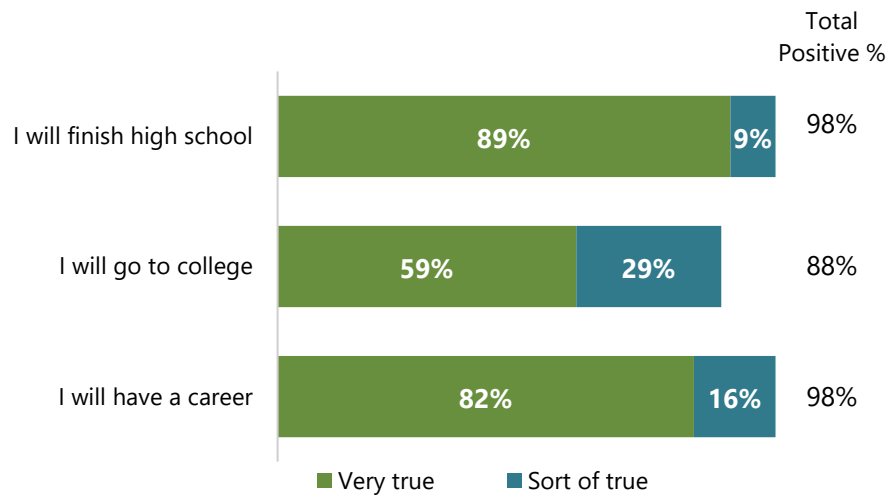
Career and college exploration are defined parts of the AI model’s strategy to raise aspirations among young people. When asked about the types of activities they did in their program, 89% of 8th graders somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they learned about jobs or careers they may want to have. This was supported by a few comments from participants who described how the program helped them find a career or explore what they might want to do after high school. One student explained, “This program have affected me in a very positive light! I feel more confident in asking for help and knowing what I am going to do in my future [sic].”

“This program has really pushed me to start thinking about what I want to do when I graduate high school.”

8th GRADE STUDENT

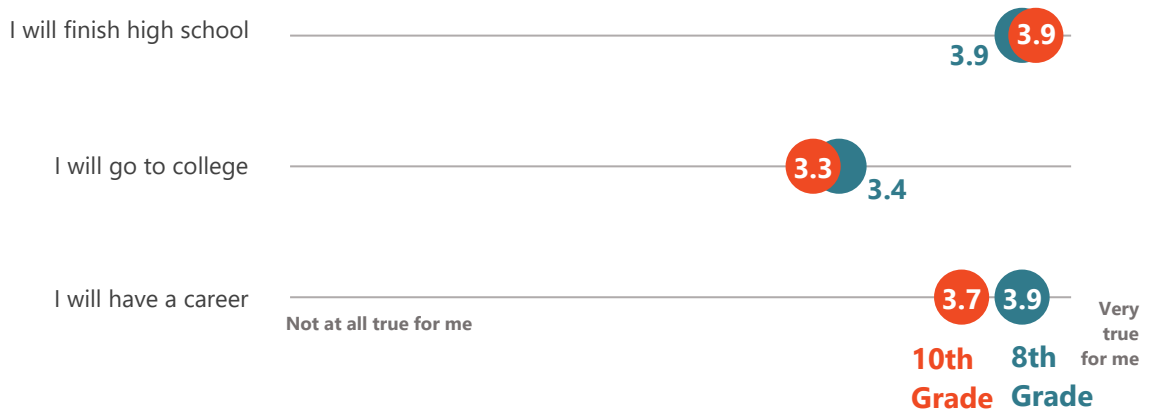
¹⁰ Maine Department of Education, Student Outcomes Data.
<https://www.maine.gov/doe/data-reporting/reporting/warehouse/outcomes>

**Figure 12. Measures of Aspiration:
Cohort 4 at 8th Grade**



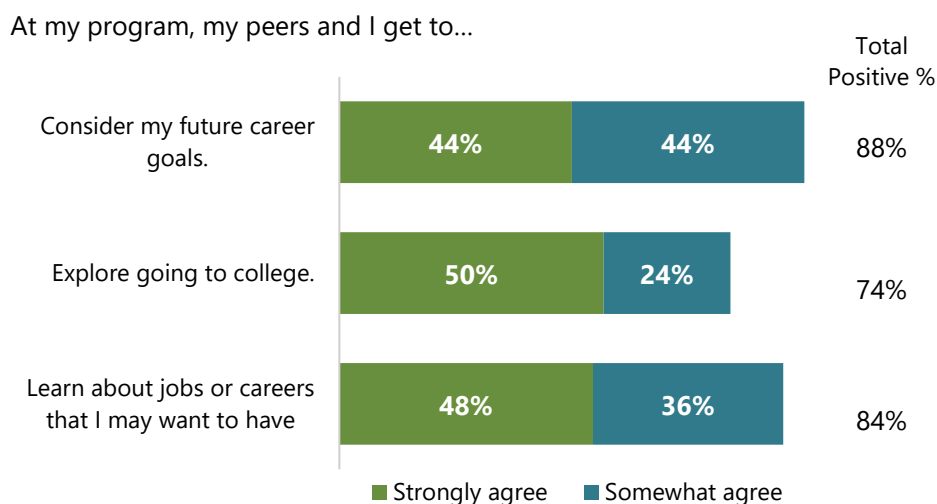
In the matched comparison, 10th graders maintained a high average agreement with the statement “I will finish high school” of 3.91 compared to 3.88 in their previous 8th grade (out of a scale of 1-4) (Figure 13). There were slight declines in average agreement with the statements “I will go to college” and “I will have a career” but the change was not statistically significant. This means the change is not substantial enough to rule out chance.

**Figure 13. Changes in Measures of Aspiration:
Cohort 2 at 8th Grade and 10th Grade (n=32)**



When asked about the types of activities they did in their program, 84% of 10th graders somewhat or strongly agreed that they learned about jobs or careers they may want to have (Figure 14). The 10th graders were also asked to comment on the extent to which the program helped with other aspects of career and college exploration; 88% somewhat or strongly agreed that the program helped them consider their future career goals and 74% somewhat or strongly agreed that it helped them explore going to college. As previously described, several AI sites ran college campus visits for their older participants over the summer which was after the survey was collected, so these responses are likely lower than we would see if the survey were taken afterwards. Nonetheless, the key takeaways are that programs focused on college and career aspirations in Year 5 and participants reported meaningful experiences.

**Figure 14. Self-Report College and Career Exploration
Cohort 2 at 10th Grade**



When asked to comment on how the program had affected them, three 10th graders mentioned that the program helped them explore career and college opportunities. One student shared, "I haven't been in this program for too long, but it's changed me for the better. I'm with people who all care for me and it's a safe environment where I can learn and take steps into exploring my future career...It's affected me in a way that sets me up for a better future plan and understanding myself more at the same time."

"It's allowed me to explore career and college opportunities"

10TH GRADE STUDENT

Conclusion and Recommendations

After completing five years of programming, the Aspirations Incubator sites have served over 400 young people from Maine's rural communities. The evidence continues to grow that participants experience real and measurable benefits from being part of an Aspirations Incubator program, particularly as the programs move away from the longer-term effects of the pandemic on programming. Students' quantitative and qualitative responses consistently showed how they thought they were acquiring new skills, experiencing new things, engaging in self-discovery, feeling a sense of belonging and community in their cohorts, and learning new behaviors as a result of the program, while Program Managers shared ways in which they have helped participants to navigate this unprecedented time. Moreover, while participants in the 10th grade may not have made substantial gains in many key areas when compared to their 8th grade selves, they did not backslide; indeed, *maintenance* over the course of the pandemic should be interpreted positively. In addition, Aspirations Incubator participants show some degree of success in terms of school attendance and standardized test scores when compared with their peers, even though both these areas were highly disrupted by COVID.

Recommendations

Against the backdrop of the Year 5 successes, we offer the following recommendations as the Aspirations Incubator navigates the final year of program implementation. In addition, the Rural Futures Fund should use these recommendations to inform its work with individual sites, as well as plan the final convening of the AI sites in Spring 2023.

For the Aspirations Incubator Sites

The first set of recommendations are provided with an eye towards what organizations and programs should be doing to implement the Aspirations Incubator in the final year to achieve the highest level of student success.

- **Recommendation 1: Continue the “return to normal.”** The latter half of Year 5 marked a notable difference in the ability of programs to engage with and retain participants, as described by Program Managers and demonstrated by the dramatic reduction in student attrition during the second reporting period. While AI sites focus on returning to their planned programming, they should continue to reflect on addressing the lingering impacts that may affect enrollment, retention and engagement, the needs of their cohorts, and what this means for programming, particularly in the early years which were designed pre-COVID. While some factors are out of the control of programs (e.g., housing) others are not (e.g., engagement in meaningful activities; overnight trips); it will be important for sites to look critically at engagement, participation, and retention, and lean into the areas where programs have influence while acknowledging the areas in which they do not. Of note, trips emerged as critical to both keeping participants engaged and spurring personal growth.
- **Recommendation 2. Continue to build social-emotional skills and resilience.** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and well-being has been well-documented, and the experiences of AI participants mirror this larger pattern. Indeed, the measures associated with resilience and well-being were areas of somewhat lower growth for participants in the past year, particularly emotion control, trust and, to a lesser degree, optimism. Nonetheless, 96% of 8th and 10th graders said they understand their strengths and how to use them. Program Managers described how they engage with participants in these discussions. In the final program year, Program Managers

should continue working with participants and cohorts to explicitly name strength or challenge areas, and building intentional programming to support this growth, with support and coaching from RFF.

- **Recommendation 3: Provide more opportunities to connect with adult mentors.** Adult relationships was another area of comparatively lower growth across all the cohorts. This was reflected on the student surveys as well, where very few talked about connecting with adult mentors (those that did often talked about Program Managers, not other adults). However, in the second half of Year 5 AI sites reported involving more adult mentors than any other reporting period. The effort to recruit and engage adult mentors should continue as a priority in the final year, as caring adults are known to be a critical factor that positively contributes to youth resilience and success.
- **Recommendation 4: Continue to address college aspirations and support participants through the application process.** College aspirations appear to have remained stable over the past year, with Cohort 4 reporting slightly higher college aspirations than the two cohorts before them, while participants in Cohort 2 who answered both the 8th and 10th grade survey showed no change in college aspirations. These rates were greater than the statewide rates of high school graduation and college initiation for Maine, which suggest the efforts over the past year have been successful. Moreover, Program Managers shared multiple examples of success from the latter half of the year (after the survey was completed). Nevertheless, Aspirations Incubator programs need to continue to address aspirations by exposing participants to college opportunities, discussing career and education goals, and addressing concerns such as affordability, health and safety, mental health or otherwise. In fact, one of the 10th graders requested more college tours in their feedback survey. Given the high college aspirations among younger participants, others may be hungry for these kinds of opportunities as well. The Rural Futures Fund can support Aspirations Incubator sites by providing access to information, expertise, resources, and cross-site discussions.

For the Rural Futures Fund

The previous recommendations are focused on AI organizations and programs. The remaining recommendations are offered to the Rural Futures Fund in its role as convener and coach to support the success of the programs.

- **Recommendation 1: Focus on collective sustainability.** The longer-term sustainability of the AI cannot be the responsibility of a single program, nor Program Manager; staff and programs are at full capacity engaging with multiple cohorts. Instead, it will require organizational leadership to commit time and resources to build the necessary infrastructure and resources around each of the Aspirations Incubator programs. However, the AI represents a unique program whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In the final year, in its role as convenor, the Rural Futures Fund should prompt sites to specifically consider longer-term sustainability and planning of their individual programs, as well as explore how the AI sites can collectively support each other towards sustainability. Identifying the areas in which RFF can continue to support AI sites (e.g., coaching), and where it cannot (e.g., program funding), is a good first step.
- **Recommendation 2: Identify how AI fits into the post-COVID policy and funding landscape.** The current policy and funding landscape has shifted dramatically since the start of the AI program in 2017. In the wake of COVID-19 the world is focused on recovery, from state and local governments, to businesses and nonprofit organizations, to schools and teachers looking at individual students. The State of Maine is funding student aspirations and higher education in

unprecedented ways, and the University of Maine System is willing to support students differently, including AI participants. Quite simply, where does the AI fit in the current landscape? What opportunities exist now that did not exist previously, and how do AI sites connect their programs to the post-COVID recovery? The RFF should engage in a strategic review of policy and funding streams that could support longer-term sustainability, and identify new opportunities to support this work, both fiscally and collaboratively.

Looking Ahead

This Year 5 report shares the significant themes that emerged in the fifth year of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot programs (September 2021 to August 2022), focusing primarily on student outcomes and how programs have recovered from the impact of COVID-19. The next report will occur at the conclusion of the sixth programming year, when Cohort 1 graduates from 12th grade, which will provide insight into their future plans and the influence of the AI experience on those plans. That report will also present a comprehensive retrospective analysis of information gathered about the AI programs over the entire duration, rather than single-year snapshots. This deeper analysis will allow us to view the achievements across time and to pool a greater number of experiences, which strengthen our ability to draw conclusions about the enduring effects of the program on participants. The final evaluation report will also set the stage for a continuation study that will track the first two cohorts of participants into their post-program and post-secondary years.