

ASPIRATIONS INCUBATOR: Year 4 Evaluation Report

March 2022



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This report was developed for the Aspirations Incubator by the Data Innovation Project, which is part of the Catherine E. Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy at the University of Southern Maine. Portland, Maine, March 2022.

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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

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 Aspirations Incubator was created 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 resiliency 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 Aspirations Incubator contracted with the Data Innovation Project to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year implementation and outcomes evaluation. This report presents a snapshot of the fourth year in terms 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 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 questionnaire on social-emotional development for children and adolescents developed by the Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR); 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 fourth year of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation. The following represent the observations and outcomes after four years of program implementation.

Participants and Emerging Outcomes

After four years of programming, the Aspirations Incubator sites have served over 300 students from Maine’s rural communities. Cohorts have been fairly evenly split between male and female participants, with some site variations although recruitment this year has yielded more females than previously. The majority of students identified as White (84%), followed by more than one race (7%, frequently White and American Indian). Two-thirds of students surveyed (grades 8 and 10) said someone from their immediate family had a college degree.

Across all cohorts and sites, students presented a number of strength and challenge areas at program initiation (based on self-assessment), averaging four strength areas and four 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; in Year 4, 89% of 8th graders in Cohort 3 agreed that the program had helped them to feel connected to their community, and 86% said they have people to talk with when they feel lonely. The 10th grade students report similar patterns of feeling connected to the community (96%) and belonging to something meaningful (93%).
- **Resiliency and Social-Emotional Skills:** At least 70% of students reported positive growth on three measures of resiliency. The overwhelming majority of 8th graders in Cohort 3 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, a trend consistent with earlier years. Among 10th graders, these trends continued although the responses were slightly less positive, except for an increase in their saying the program helped them to understand their strengths and how to use them.
- **Exposure to Diversity:** Most 8th graders in Cohort 3 reported that the program helped them to experience new places and 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. Among 10th graders, similar patterns persisted, with a noted increase in acceptance of others although they were less likely to report that they are willing to try new thing.
- **Learning, School Engagement, and Aspirations:** Over 70% of students reported experiencing positive growth on measures related to learning interest and critical thinking over Year 4; in addition, Aspirations Incubator 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, and more likely to exceed academic expectations. However, post-secondary aspirations were lower this year: among 8th graders in Cohort 3 only 55% said it was very true that they would attend college (lower than previous cohorts). Similarly, 58% of 10th graders responded that this was very true (although more indicated it was sort of true).

Site Attrition

By the conclusion of Year 4 three of the original eight Aspirations Incubator sites had dropped out of the pilot program. This provided an opportunity to look more deeply at the site experiences and reflect on lessons learned. Two interconnected threads appear to be the most predictive of site success: buy-in and support for the model - starting with leadership - and organizational stability. Certainly, sites which remain in the Aspirations Incubator have also experienced organizational instability in terms of shifting infrastructure, resources or staff departures but they weathered those challenges in part because leadership was fully invested in the Aspirations Incubator program model. This investment manifested in terms of leadership understanding the key components of the program; ensuring others in the organization were also aware of those concepts; investing in the staffing and resources; changing organizational policies to support the Aspirations Incubator program; and focusing on longer-term sustainability. Another aspect that has arisen as a fundamental component of Aspirations Incubator success is the strength of the program’s relationship with the local school district as evidenced through the engagement with school staff and leaders and program access to the school buildings, As the AI implementation team looks ahead towards expanding the model to other organizations, this process analysis suggests requiring a longer learning and planning period (e.g., 12 months) for organizational leadership and management staff, prior to hiring and launching a new program.

Recommendations

When looking ahead to the final two years of the Aspirations Incubator, the successes and challenges faced by the Aspirations Incubator 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 Aspirations Incubator navigates the fourth year of program implementation.

For Aspirations Incubator Organizations and Programs

- **Recommendation 1: Examine cohort gender distribution.** Year 4 recruitment showed a notable increase in female enrollment over male enrollment, driven in large part by two programs. While a single year may be an anomaly, this pattern warrants further discussion and exploration at each site.
- **Recommendation 2: Build connection in the time of COVID.** The data suggest the pandemic has interrupted the program's ability to build relationships and connection with newer cohorts and many sites reflected on how crucial the first two years were to building cohort cohesiveness. As the programs begin to recruit a new cohort and support existing ones, it will be important for them to continue building connection and explore new ways to do so.
- **Recommendation 3: Refocus on expanding worldviews.** Expanding students' worldviews is a critical component of the Aspirations Incubator model. The student survey data from the past year suggests that fewer students were willing to try new things or had interacted with people from different cultures. Despite the on-going challenges of the pandemic, program sites should continue to offer experiences that will help students expand their horizons.
- **Recommendation 4: Focus on the experiences of non-White students.** Students of color may be having somewhat different experiences in the Aspirations Incubator. Sites should reflect on these results and consider their program goals through a diversity and inclusion lens.
- **Recommendation 5: Address college aspirations.** College aspirations appear to have suffered over the past year because the pandemic has negatively affected this aspect of the program. In the coming year, Aspirations Incubator programs need to address this challenge head-on. The AI Implementation Team can support Aspirations Incubator sites by providing access to information, expertise, resources, and cross-site discussions.

For the AI Implementation Team

- **Recommendation 1: Review and update fidelity targets.** This report has demonstrated the ongoing effects of COVID-19 in terms of recruitment, engagement, and retention. As COVID continues to disrupt every aspect of our lives, the Implementation Team should examine the fidelity and accountability targets developed earlier in the evaluation process and make appropriate updates to reflect the ongoing challenges.
- **Recommendation 2: Focus on the future and what works.** Five of the original eight Aspirations Incubator sites remain in the pilot. Looking ahead towards program expansion, the Implementation Team should work with the Aspirations Incubator sites and the DIP to develop a readiness assessment for potential Aspirations Incubator sites and organizations. Key topics should be leadership buy-in, organizational stability, knowledge management, risk management, volunteers and mentors, and school relationships.

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. 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 43% 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.³ 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.⁴

The Aspirations Incubator was launched in 2017, as 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 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 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 students 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. Trekkers was selected 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 Trekkers Principles. More information about the Trekkers Principles can be found on the Trekkers Training Institute website: www.trekkersinstitute.org.

¹ Center for Promise (2015). Don’t quit on me: What young people who left school say about the power of relationships.

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

⁴ Tinkham, K. (2020) *Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth*. Maine Resilience Building Network. Accessed 3/1/2021: <https://maineresilience.org/resources/Documents/MaineResilienceBuildingNetworkCultivatingMatteringforMaineYouthWhitePaper.pdf>

Aspiration Incubator Sites

Table 1 presents the Aspirations Incubator grantees who delivered programming in Year 4. However, at the start of Year 5, Apex Youth Connection left the Aspirations Incubator, which brings the total of active sites to five (out of eight originally). A more complete discussion of site attrition can be found later in this report.

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 3 rd to 12 th 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	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

**Departed the Aspirations Incubator in fall 2021*

Purpose of this Report

The Data Innovation Project (DIP) has been contracted to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year evaluation of the Aspirations Incubator. This annual evaluation report shares the significant themes that emerged from Year 4 of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot program (September 2020 to August 2021). Unlike previous

iterations, this annual report shifts away from diving deeply into program implementation and fidelity to the principles, to focus more deeply on program experiences and student outcomes.

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 4, the Aspirations Incubator sites have two years remaining in the six-year timeline. The report presents a snapshot of this fourth year in terms of program enrollment, implementation and participant's self-reported outcomes using information gathered from the following sources: 14 semi-annual site reports; 16 key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, community stakeholders, and mentors; data from 58 8th grade surveys and 48 10th grade surveys; annual data from a self-report measure of social-emotional development for 267 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.⁵

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 with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic woven throughout. The final section includes an analysis of lessons learned by reflecting on the experiences of sites who have remained and those who have left the program.

⁵ <https://www.aspirationsincubator.org/the-results>

Program Enrollment

Long-term engagement is central to the Aspirations Incubator program model. Program sites 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 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 2020-2021 program year, each site was expected to be supporting four cohorts of students. Most sites begin recruiting a new cohort in the fall, select participants by December, and begin programming by mid-January/February.

Recruitment & Enrollment

Aspiration Incubator sites enrolled 73 new 7th grade students in Cohort 4 in Year 4, which is fewer than previous years (88, 86, and 83, respectively). In total, AI programs have enrolled 377 students, which includes those enrolled with a cohort initially and students who joined after 7th grade.

Recruitment continued to be a challenge because of the disruptions brought by COVID-19. Many of the avenues program managers would typically use to share information and generate interest about their programs were not available. One program usually runs many activities with prospective students to give them a sense of what the program is like and build excitement, however, most were cancelled this year due to school-related COVID-19 issues. Several programs were only allowed in their schools for restricted amounts of time, which hampered their ability to build trust and connections with students. Some programs were not allowed in their schools at all. These programs had to draw on other connections - such as teachers or by showing up to community events - to reach prospective participants.

“The only thing different about it is that we had significantly less time in the classrooms as we normally do; only had a total of 5 minutes in classrooms when we would have previously had 30 minutes or more.”

PROGRAM MANAGER

When looking at enrollment by gender (Table 2), Cohort 1 was more evenly split between male and female students, Cohorts 2 and 3 had slightly more females than males, and Cohort 4 was much more skewed towards females (61%). There was some variation by site in each year, and I Know ME was consistently more male than female in their first three cohorts, but the proportion flipped for Cohort 4. The consistent decrease in male engagement warrants further investigation.

Table 2. Initial Program Enrollment, by Cohort and Male/Female Gender⁶

Program	Cohort 1		Cohort 2		Cohort 3		Cohort 4	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
I Know ME	100%	0%	60%	40%	73%	27%	25%	75%
Journey	27%	73%	35%	65%	54%	46%	25%	75%
North Star	43%	57%	33%	67%	38%	62%	60%	40%
River Runners	41%	59%	42%	58%	24%	76%	41%	59%
Trek2Connect*	40%	60%	60%	40%	50%	50%	33%	67%
Waypoint	63%	37%	50%	50%	50%	50%	42%	58%
All Sites	51%	49%	46%	54%	46%	54%	39%	61%

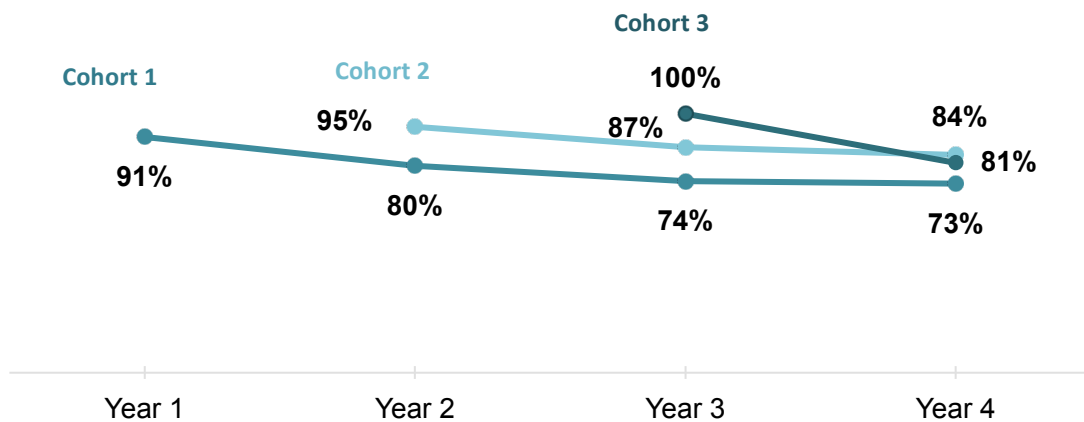
⁶ Program managers have reported some students who identify as non-binary, which is not presented here to protect student confidentiality. Future reports may contain this information.

*Trek2Connect disbanded its initial cohort; those students are included here for comparative purposes.

Retention

Four 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 73% for Cohort 1 in Year Four (Figure 1). Both Cohort 1 and 2 experienced greater losses from Year 2 to Year 3 due to COVID-19, however, these losses appear to stabilize from Year 3 to Year 4.

Figure 1. Overall Retention Rates, by Cohort and Year



Cohort 3 saw the most drastic retention drop from the first year they were in the program to their second year. This maps onto the challenges program managers had shared about this cohort specifically. For most sites this group of students had only a couple of activities together before the pandemic spurred lockdowns and remote learning. This was not enough time to establish group bonding and connection with their program manager which made it more difficult to keep these students engaged through remote programming. When Year 4 allowed returns to in-person programming, these students were more likely to struggle with social anxiety. One site explained this struggle in their semi-annual report:

“We were pleased to see many youth who were unable to make it to remote meetings joined us as active participants over the summer. There were others however who were unable to attend even after we resumed in person programming whether due to change of location, scheduling conflicts, or stress of rejoining their peers in a post lock down world. In particular, Cohort 3 seems to be most affected by this.... While this strongly supports our belief that the 7th and 8th grades are of the utmost importance for establishing a firm foundation of cohort bonding, Cohort 3 has not had an adequate opportunity to do so.”

**Table 3. Program Flow at the end of Year 4,
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	3	2	88%
River Runners	17	7	3	88%
Trek2Connect*	-	-	-	-
Waypoint	20	3	13	43%
Total	86	16	28	73%
Cohort 2				
I Know ME	10	2	1	92%
Journey	17	0	2	88%
NorthStar	13	3	2	88%
River Runners	18	1	0	100%
Trek2Connect	10	3	5	62%
Waypoint	20	5	6	76%
Total	88	14	16	84%
Cohort 3				
I Know ME	11	0	1	91%
Journey	13	8	0	100%
NorthStar	8	3	4	64%
River Runners	21	1	2	91%
Trek2Connect	10	3	5	62%
Waypoint	20	2	7	68%
Total	83	17	19	81%
Cohort 4				
I Know ME	8	0	1	88%
Journey	12	0	0	100%
NorthStar	11	0	0	100%
River Runners	17	1	0	100%
Trek2Connect	6	1	1	86%
Waypoint	19	0	0	100%
Total	73	0	0	100%

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.*

These challenges were not unique to Cohort 3, however. Each cohort continued to experience withdrawals and shifts to partially active enrollment status. Program managers listed several reasons for these changes in enrollment:

- Mental health crisis
- Social anxiety
- Demands of other responsibilities (school, jobs, sports)
- Providing childcare to younger siblings
- Housing instability
- Environmental changes, such as parents moving or moving to live with a different parent, switching to a school out of the service area, or changing to homeschool.

For those who remained in the programs, there were still numerous barriers to their consistent participation - Zoom fatigue, internet connectivity issues, transportation, academic struggles, and burnout were some of the challenges shared by program managers. Sites also reported that several students had family issues that negatively impacted their participation in the program. For some programs, this year was the first time they were involved in crisis intervention or mandatory reporting situations. Students experiencing greater levels of crisis are not more likely to withdraw from their Aspirations Incubator programs, however, but they may be more prone to inconsistent attendance or switching to partial enrollment.

“Responding to and coping with life during COVID has made it difficult for some students to think beyond meeting basic needs and adapt to the everchanging rules that dictate the nature of our programming. “

PROGRAM MANAGER

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 four cohorts of students and present evidence of short-term gains observed after the fourth year of program implementation. The data represents a point-in-time snapshot of each cohort of students who are at different points within the program.

Student Characteristics

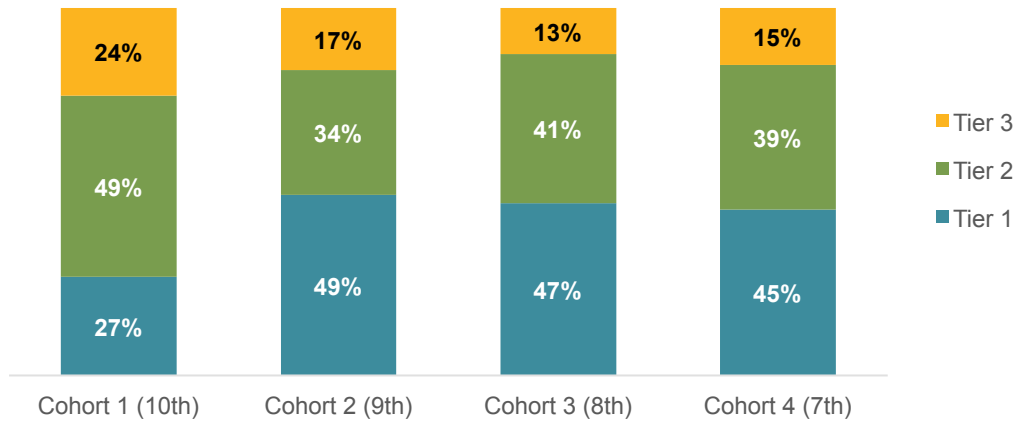
In Year 4, 267 students completed the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) at the start of the programming. The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) is comprised of 41 to 61 questions spanning 14 scales and grouped into three areas of life skills: Resilience, Relationships, and Learning and School Engagement. 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 HAS and how it is used by programs can be found in the appendices of previous annual reports. Across all cohorts and sites, students presented a number of strength and challenge areas, averaging just over four strength areas and just under four challenge areas. The most frequent student strengths were empathy (38%), conduct (24%), prosocial behavior (33%) and emotional control (28%). The most common challenge areas were hyperactivity (28%), learning interest (28%) and emotional symptoms (27%).

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

- 301 students participated in the AI program across six sites.
- For those who completed the HSA assessment, (267), 52% identified as girls and 48% as boys.
- 8% of students (22) chose not to disclose their race or ethnicity.
- Among those who did disclose:
 - 84% White
 - 7% more than one race
 - 4% American Indian
 - 5% African American, Asian, or Latino.
- 60% of student survey respondents said, “Yes,” someone from their immediate family had a college degree.

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. At the start of Year 4, Cohort 1 students self-identified as needing higher levels of support when compared to the other cohorts, as shown in Figure 2. Students in Cohort 1 have consistently reported higher levels of need compared to Cohorts 2 and 3. In terms of gender, there was little difference overall between boys and girls; however, girls in Cohorts 1 and 4 showed higher levels of support needs at the start of Year 4 compared with boys.

Figure 2. Level of Support Needs at the Start of Year 4, by Cohort (N= 267)



Student Outcomes

The following section discusses the evidence of positive student outcomes at the conclusion of Year 4, with the following notable highlights:

- **Relationships:** The majority of students reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships each year; in Year 4, 89% of 8th graders in Cohort 3 agreed that the program had helped them to feel connected to their community, and 86% said they have people to talk with when they feel lonely. The 10th grade students report similar patterns of being connected to the community (96%) and belonging to something meaningful (93%).
- **Resiliency and Social-Emotional Skills:** At least 70% of students reported positive growth on three measures of resiliency. The overwhelming majority of 8th graders in Cohort 3 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, a trend consistent with earlier years. Among 10th graders, these trends continued although the responses were slightly less positive. Of note was an increase in 10th graders saying the program helped them to understand their strengths and how to use them.
- **Exposure to Diversity:** Most 8th graders in Cohort 3 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. Among 10th graders, similar patterns persisted, with a noted increase in acceptance of others although they were less likely to report that they are willing to try new things.
- **Learning, School Engagement, and Aspirations:** Over 70% of students reported experiencing positive growth on measures related to learning interest and critical thinking over Year 4; 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, and more likely to exceed academic expectations. However, post-secondary aspirations were lower this year: Among 8th graders in Cohort 3 only 55% said it was very true that they would attend college (lower than previous cohorts). Similarly, 58% of 10th graders responded that this was very true (although more indicated it was sort of true).

Sense of Belonging and Positive Relationships

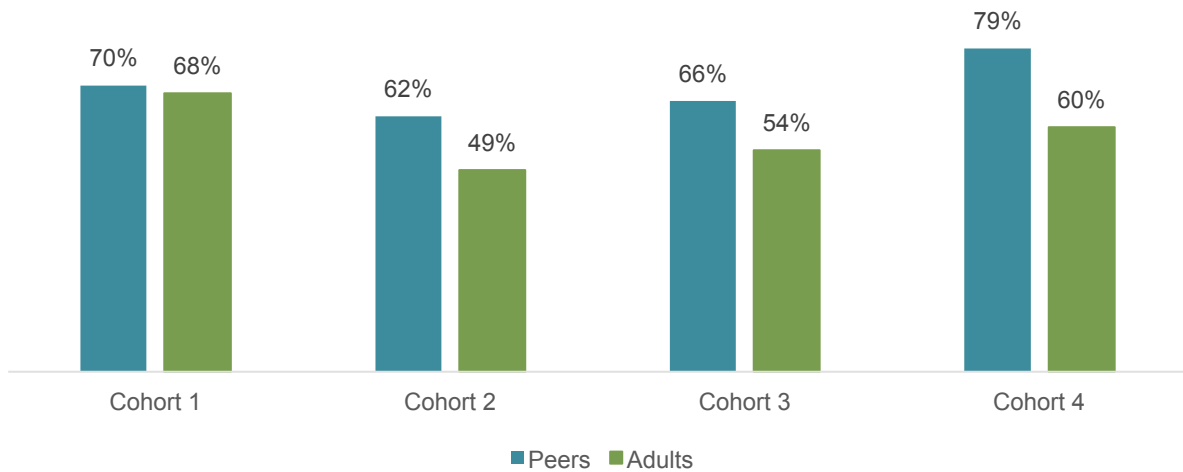
The HSA-RSC asks students to compare themselves to the beginning of the year and rate the extent to which they have experienced positive changes as a result of the program. Despite the ongoing challenges with recruiting a high number of adult volunteers, the majority of students reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships each year. Figure 3 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. At 79%, Cohort 4 showed the greatest improvements in terms of peer relationships, while Cohort 1 showed the greatest improvements in terms of adult relationships (68%). Although not pictured, compared with boys, girls were less likely to report improvements in their relationships with peers (62% compared with 78%) or adults (54% compared with 62%).

“I think there is something really important that there are other adults who see my son and believe in him as much as I do.”

PARENT

In the student survey, Cohort 1 and 3 shared various comments about their strengthened relationships with peers, and to a lesser degree their relationships with adults. One student explained how the program had provided “a new avenue for me to meet new people and develop new long-lasting bonds.” Of those students who mentioned adult relationships, one said, “It [the program] has given me a mentor,” and another wrote, “I love always having a trusted adult that I can go to with anything.” Lastly, one student shared, “It’s made me realize I have more than just my parents as reliable adults to talk too.”

**Figure 3. Measures of Improved Relationships:
Percent of Students Reporting Positive Change at the Conclusion of the Year 4, by Cohort**



Connection to Community

At the conclusion of their 8th grade year, 92% of students in Cohort 3 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, 86% 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, 40% and 37% respectively. As comparison, the 2019 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey found that only 57% of high school students in Maine felt like they mattered to their community

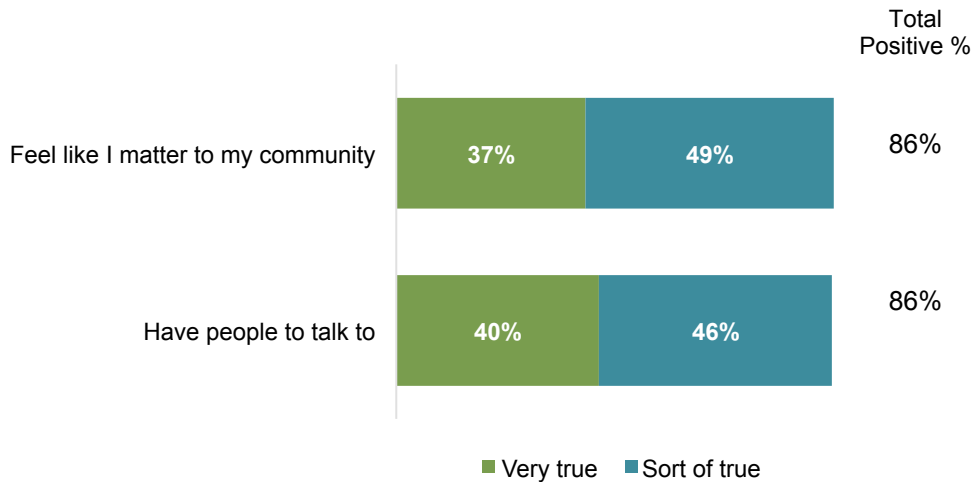
“Through the pandemic the program has given me people to talk to, and it has given me more hope for the future.”

8th GRADE STUDENT

A couple of 8th grade students also shared comments about the sense of connection fostered by their Aspirations Incubator programs. One commented, “It has made me feel more connected to my community.” Some students also spoke to how the program helped them become more engaged with their communities. One of these 8th graders explained, “The program affected me by helping my understand ways to help my community and how to help people in need...”

These levels are in keeping with what past cohorts have reported at 8th grade, however, for some of the prompts the “very true” responses were much lower than past cohorts. For example, 50% of Cohort 1 and 54% of Cohort 2 reported it was very true that “when I feel lonely, there are several people I can talk to” compared to 40% reported by Cohort 3.

**Figure 4. Self-Reported Sense of Connection:
Cohort 3 at 8th Grade**

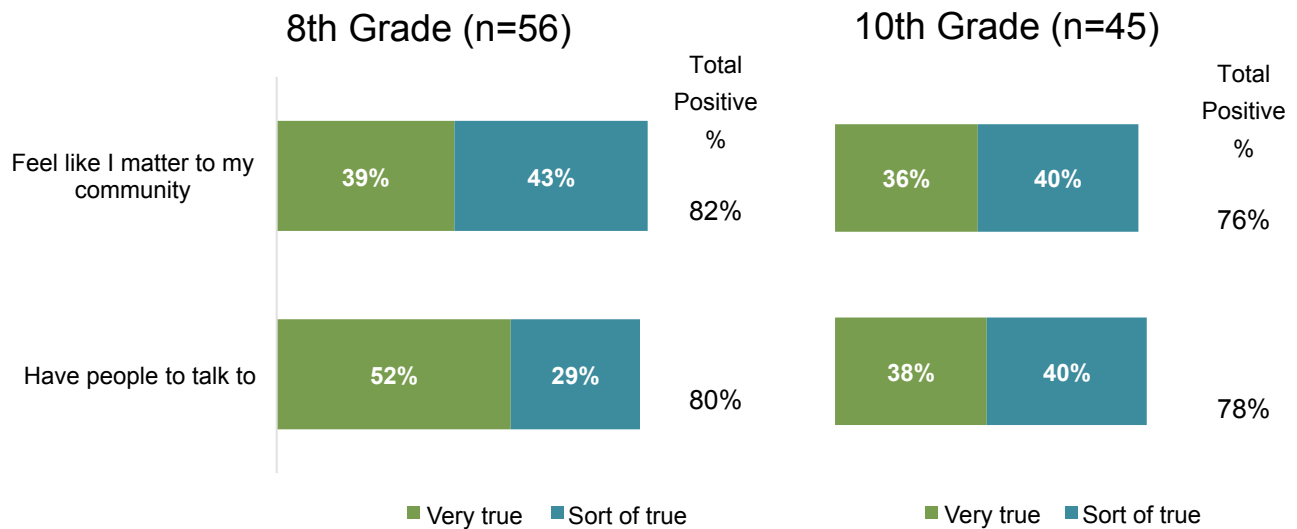


At the conclusion of their 10th grade year, 96% of students in Cohort 1 somewhat or strongly agreed that being in the program had helped them to feel connected to their community and 93% felt they belonged to something meaningful. These levels are similar to what Cohort 1 reported in 8th grade. However, as shown in Figure 5, the cohort’s total positive agreement with the statements “I have several people with whom to talk when I feel lonely” and “I feel like I matter to my community” dropped slightly from 8th grade to 10th grade (80% to 78% and 82% to 76%, respectively). It is important to note that this compares two somewhat different groups of Cohort 1 since some students withdrew and some new students joined in that time from 8th to 10th grade.

“This program has been a great experience throughout the years. It built and strengthened connections to other people within my community...”

10th GRADE STUDENT

**Figure 5. Self-Reported Sense of Connection:
Cohort 1 at 8th Grade and 10th Grade**



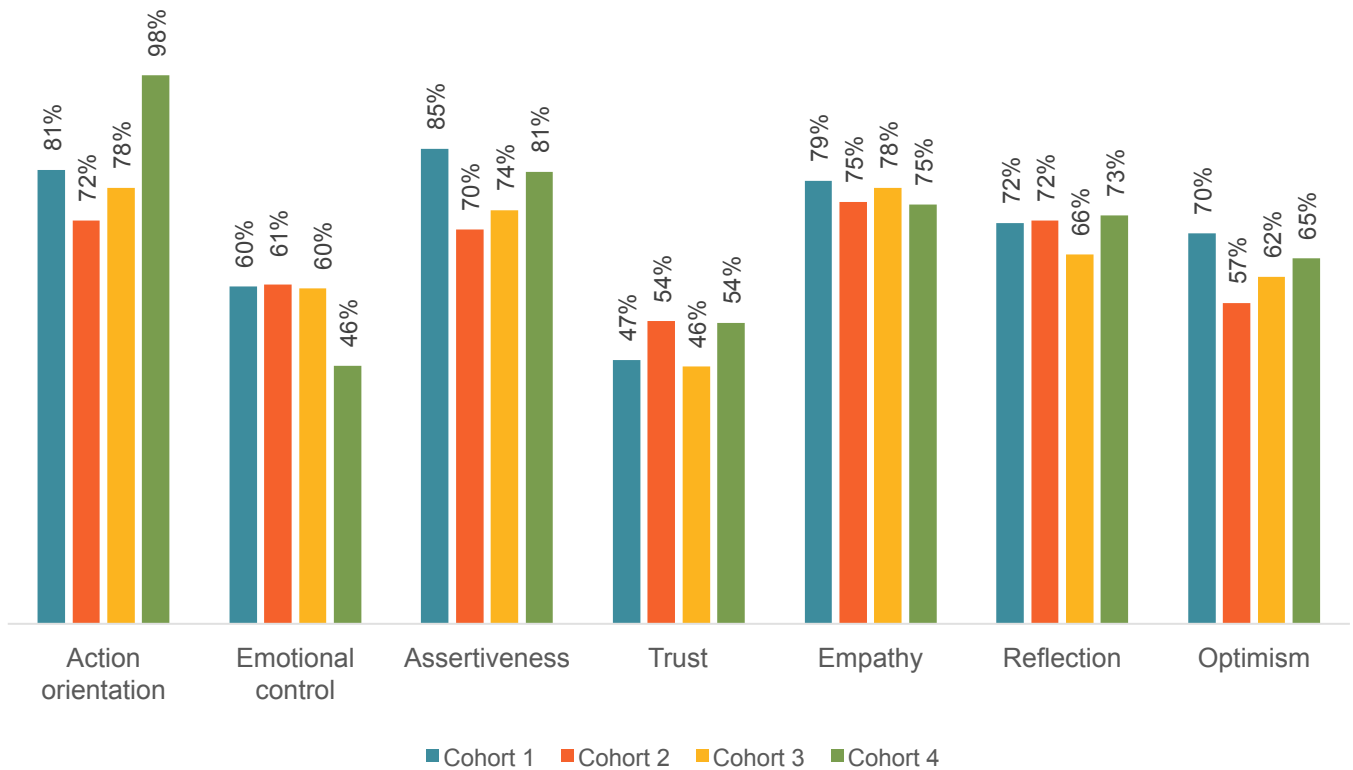
The 10th grade survey for Cohort 1 offered us the opportunity to match students’ responses to their 8th grade survey responses, which we successfully completed for 36 students. Matching survey results in this manner allows us to use statistical tests to determine whether or not any observed differences were simply due to chance.⁷ This analysis revealed no significant changes in how students responded to questions about connection. However, this finding is likely because the students generally maintained positive responses (very true or sort of true), regardless of whether they decreased or increased from 8th to 10th grade. Indeed, some of the matched students shared sentiments about how the program helped them feel connect to a community. For example, one wrote, “It has given me extra support and made me feel less on my own.” Another explained, “This program has given me a break from home to hang out with friends and help my community. This program lets me be who I want to be without others around me judging what I do.”

⁷ 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 (36 cases).

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 particular measures of social-emotional skills and resilience. As shown in Figure 6, at least 70% of students in each cohort reported experiencing positive growth in three areas of resilience. Students were less likely to report growth in terms of Emotional Control and Trust and, to a lesser degree, Optimism. The results are consistent with the findings from the interim evaluation report and may reflect the ongoing challenges and fatigue associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 area of action orientation (87% compared with 78%) and trust (57% compared with 47%).

Figure 6. Overall Resilience: Percent of Students Reporting Positive Change at the Conclusion of Year 4, by Cohort



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 students agreed or strongly agreed that they learned how to express their needs (92%), make concrete plans (90%), stay level-headed (85%), talk to others when they disagree (94%), and understand their own strengths (92%). In addition, when asked how much certain characteristics were “true” for them, 94% said it was sort of or very true that they had a number of good qualities and 86% set long-term goals for themselves (Figure 7). Eighty percent know how to calm down when they get upset and 82% were satisfied with themselves; 73% said they ask for help when they need it.

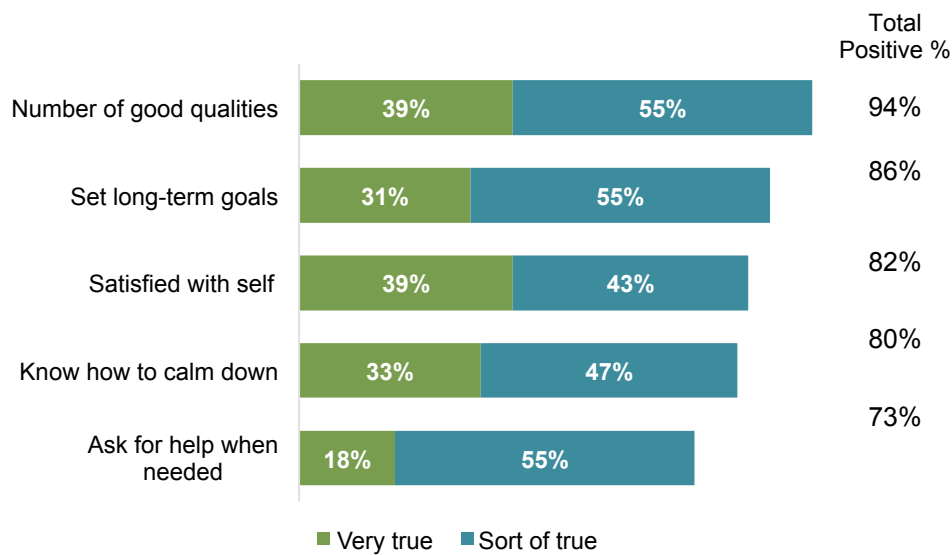
“The program has helped me learn new things and experience things I never would have without it. It has helped me become better with dealing with stress and setting goals.”

8th GRADE STUDENT

The Cohort 3 students had many things to say about how the program had helped them with uncomfortable feelings and communication.

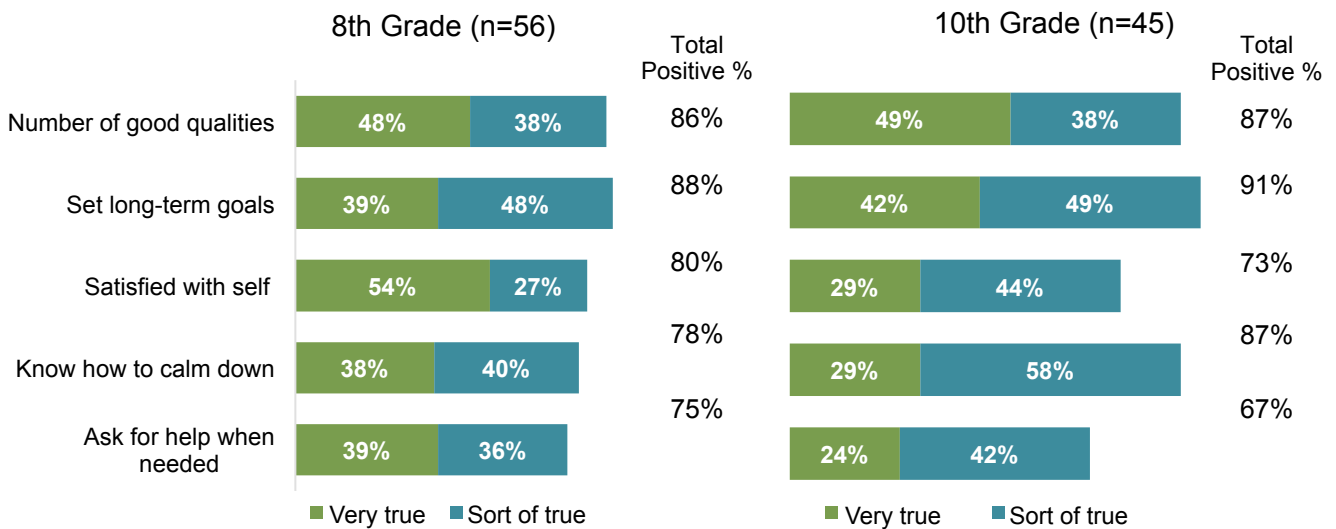
Two students shared that the program helped them manage their stress more effectively. One student shared that they did not think the program affected them, “I don’t think that the program itself has had any tremendous effect upon who I am. We have certainly done some very fun things, but I am still who I was when I started, just more confident.” It is unclear whether they ascribe any of their increased confidence to the program or if they think the outcome is unrelated.

**Figure 7. Self-Reported Social-Emotional Skills:
Cohort 3 at 8th Grade**



At the conclusion of their 10th grade year, 87% of students in Cohort 1 reported that it was sort of or very true that they had a number of good qualities and 91% reported they set long-term goals for themselves (Figure 8). Eighty-seven percent know how to calm down when they get upset and 73% were satisfied with themselves; 67% said they ask for help when they need it.

**Figure 8. Self-Reported Social-Emotional Skills:
Cohort 1 at 8th Grade and 10th Grade**



Of the 45 10th grade survey respondents, 21 shared some statement about how the program affected them on a social-emotional level; it was one of the strongest themes among 8th and 10th graders. However, as shown in Figure 8, the cohort’s total positive agreement with the statements “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” and “I ask for help when I need it” dropped from 8th to 10th grade (80% to 73% and 75% to 67%, respectively). Again, this analysis compares two different groups of Cohort 1 since some students withdrew, and some new students joined in that time from 8th to 10th grade. For the 36 students included in the matched comparison analysis, the average response to the statement “Being in this program has helped me...understand my strengths and how to use them” increased significantly (from 3.14 to 3.44 ($p \leq 0.05$)). This means that the students’ increased agreement with the statement in 10th grade was likely not due to chance alone.

Cohort 1 shared many thoughts on their social-emotional growth as they reflected on their years in the Aspirations Incubator program. Numerous students shared general statements about feeling like they had become a “better” person, though few went on to describe what being better meant to them. One student followed up to say the program staff helped them communicate better; another said they were a better person “socially and mentally.” One student shared, “It has made me grow as a person and change all the way up from my bad qualities.” Another student expressed some more specific impacts around social anxiety and their own capacity to gain and maintain employment:

“I think it has really helped me come out of my shell and taught me how to resolve issues without making them worse.”

10th GRADE STUDENT

“I think that the program has affected me for the better. Before I joined the program I would never talk to or in front of anyone because I just always felt anxious in front of them. But thanks to this program I was able to get out there and talk to more people. I also think that if I hadn't joined this group then I wouldn't have been able to get a job as I never talked to people but now, I have a job.” [sic]

Exposure to Diversity

One of the goals of the program is to expose students to a diversity of people, places, and experiences. For the 8th graders this year (Cohort 3), 98% reported that it was sort of or very true that they accept people who are different, 92% said they try to understand another person’s point of view and 90% said they try new things, even when they are not sure they will like them (Figure 9). It should be noted that the “very true” responses were lower for the last two items, understanding another person’s point of view and trying new things, 35% and 33% respectively.

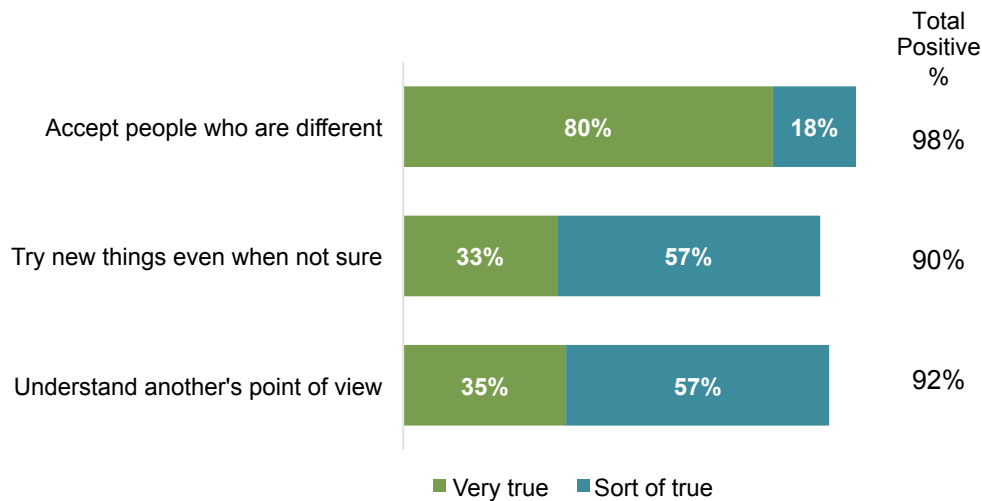
“It gave me new experiences, it opened my eyes to some of other people’s struggles.”

8th GRADE STUDENT

Despite the low proportion of 8th graders who believe it is very true that they try new things even when they are not sure, numerous students shared sentiments about how much the program has exposed them to new experiences and pushed them to try new things. One student explained, “This program had been very successful in convincing me to try new things or get involved in new projects.”

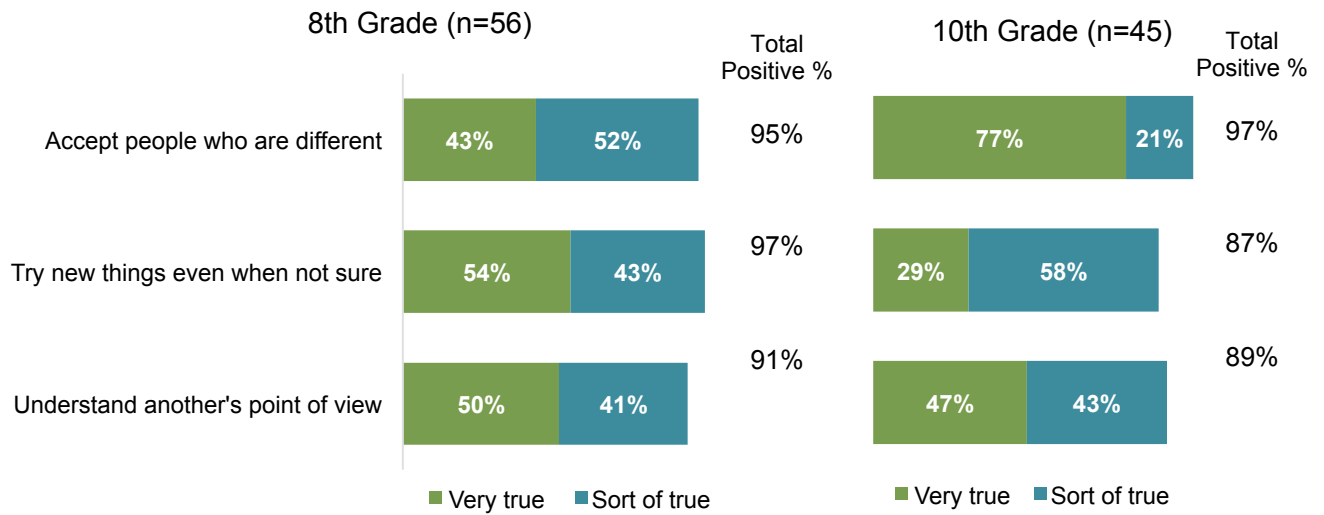
In terms of increased acceptance of others, a couple of students shared comments that showed shifts in thinking and perceptions. For example, one student said, “The program has affected me by meeting new people, experiencing new things, and becoming closer to people I wouldn’t usually be close with.” Another shared, “I think it’s made me a better person overall. I accept everyone now, even if it’s confusing at first. I also try to listen to the other person in an argument.” These comments do not imply a radical shift in openness and tolerance but could be seen as the early moves towards more inclusive behavior.

**Figure 9. Self-Reported Acceptance of Diversity:
Cohort 3 at 8th Grade**



At the conclusion of their 10th grade year, 97% of students in Cohort 1 reported that it was sort of or very true that they accept people who are different and 89% reported that they try to understand the other person’s point of view in a disagreement (Figure 10). The cohort’s total positive agreement with the statements “I try new things even when I am not sure” dropped 10 percentage points from 8th grade to 10th grade (97% to 87%). Although this compares two different groups of Cohort 1, it is also consistent with the matched comparison result which found the average response decreased significantly from 3.53 to 3.22 ($p \leq 0.05$). This means that the students’ decreased agreement with the statement in 10th grade was likely not due to chance alone.

**Figure 10. Self-Reported Acceptance of Diversity:
Cohort 1 at 8th Grade and 10th Grade**



Despite this overall reduction in students’ willingness to try things they are unsure about, several 10th graders said the program got them out of their “comfort zone.” For example, one student wrote, “Yes, it has most definitely affected me. It’s has helped me meet new people and get out of my comfort zone.” Another shared, “It has helped me talk to people that I wouldn't normally talk to, it has helped me get out of my comfort zone just a little with the different activities that we do.”

While students experienced new things and demonstrated skills that exhibit tolerance, only about 30% of 8th and 10th graders very much agreed that they had interacted with people from different cultures as a result of the program. However, students did talk about changes in their capacity to empathize and dismantle their biases. As one student noted, “It has made me more accepting of people’s differences and made me want to learn more about different cultures.” Another explained, “I think that it has changed some views I have. Like be able to see past specific things, like stereotypes.”

“The program gives them a shared value system that I have witnessed them embracing.”

ADULT MENTOR

One of the Aspirations Incubator program’s adult mentors also noted the students exhibited inclusive behaviors and attributed that, in part, to the program’s design. The mentor explained:

“One of the things I observed about students in the program, although they come from diverse backgrounds, the culture and shared experience of the program has allowed them to appreciate one another and know one another...the program gives them a shared value system that I have witnessed them embracing. They come from a diverse background, we don’t have a lot of racial diversity, but we have a lot of socio-economic diversity, and I can see that represented in the program. Also, their academic abilities and interests, their athletic abilities are very diverse.”

They note that although there is not much racial diversity in the group there are still differences that are smoothed out by the program’s shared culture and value system. Its unclear, however, whether these values and skills also translate into antiracist consciousness and behavior. As one Program Manager noted, “Cultural competency has

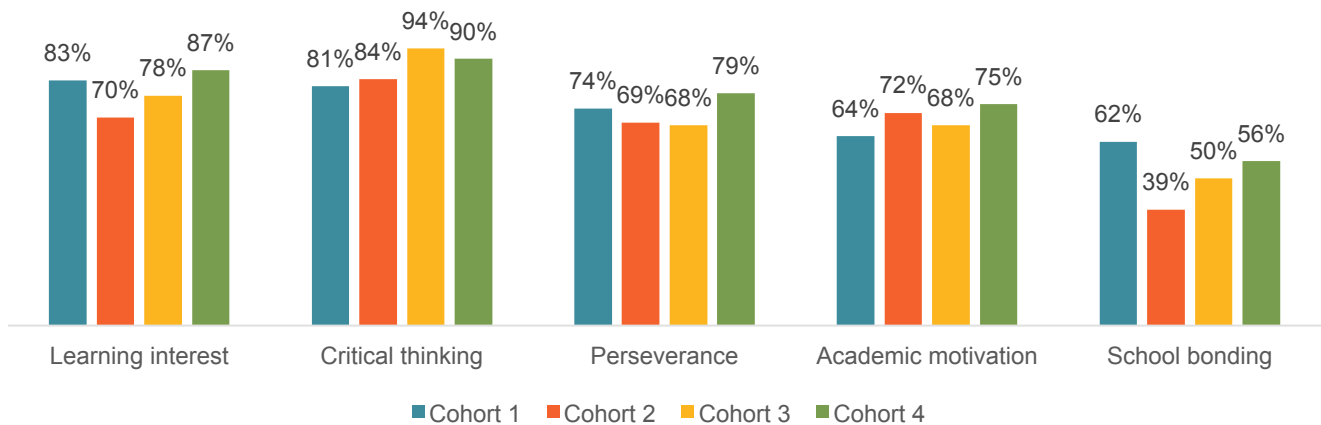
not grown, we live in an isolated place, and we do what we can, but exposure to other people of color, or religions, they have been missing out on that big time.” This is also somewhat supported by students’ responses to the survey prompt “At my program, my peers and I...interact with people from different cultures” – 79% of 8th graders somewhat or strongly agreed and 83% of 10th graders somewhat or strongly agreed. Although these levels appear high, relative to the other program design prompts, this item was the lowest scoring.

The research team gained additional insight this year by examining the results from two new scales that were administered with the HSA that were developed to measure the Fair Treatment and Cultural Relevance of youth programs. Five sites opted to collect these measures from their students. When the results were compared based on students’ self-reported racial identity, it appears that students of color (18) had lower scoring responses in comparison to their White peers (98), averaging 1.84 compared with 2.36 on a five-point scale for fair treatment and 1.84 compared with 2.11 for cultural relevancy. Although the numbers are relatively small, the results were statistically significant for fair treatment, meaning students of color were less likely to report feeling they were fairly treated. These are important findings to continue exploring with program sites in the coming year.

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. Figure 11 shows the percentage of students reporting positive growth on each of the individual measures related to learning and school engagement at the conclusion of Year 4 for each cohort. Students in each cohort were most likely to report positive growth in terms of Learning Interest and Critical Thinking and were least likely to show growth in terms of School Bonding (positive personal connections and the sense of belonging in one’s school). Girls were slightly less likely to report growth in learning interests (75% compared with 84%), but slightly more likely to report growth in perseverance (75% compared with 70%). Again, this is consistent with the findings in the interim evaluation report, and likely continue to show the effects of COVID-19 on learning engagement.

**Figure 11. Measures of Learning and School Engagement:
Percent of Students Reporting Positive Change at the Conclusion of Year 4, by Cohort**

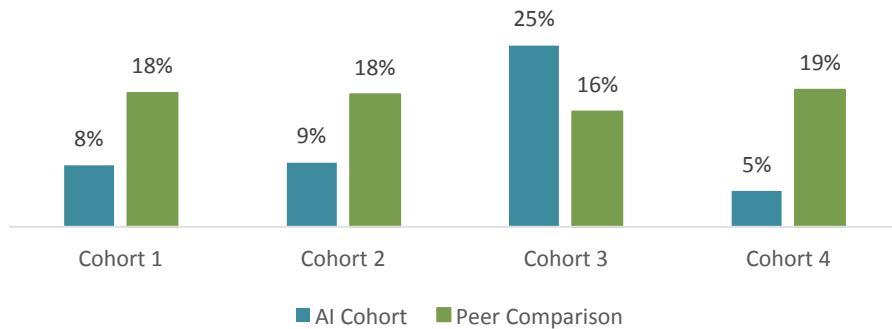


In addition to the HSA-RSC indicators, the five remaining Aspirations Incubator sites were able to gather information about their cohorts from the participating schools for the 2020-2021 year regarding attendance and standardized testing results. The information was reliable for attendance; academic achievement was also consistent across all the programs, although the school comparison data was only consistently shared by four of the sites. Note that as part of the comparative analysis, we removed the Aspirations Incubator students in each

category for the aggregate school counts, which enabled us to compare Aspirations Incubator students to their peers.

The data showed that most Aspirations Incubator students were notably less likely to miss 18 or more days of school in a year compared with their peers (Figure 12) with the exception of Cohort 3 (8th grade). The results suggest that being part of the Aspirations Incubator programs may help students 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 student attendance. Were Aspirations Incubator students more likely to attend school, or were they simply less affected by COVID illness and quarantine protocols than their peers?

**Figure 12. Percent of Students Missing 18+ Days, by Year:
Aspirations Incubator Cohorts Compared to Peers**

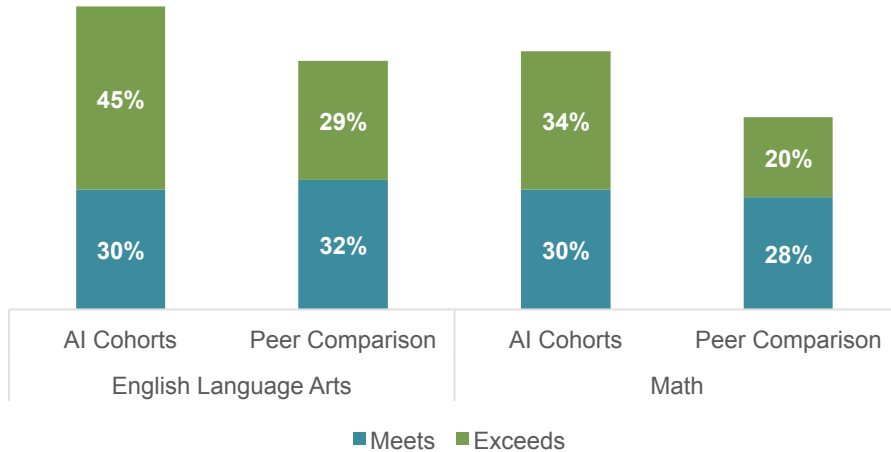


Academic achievement was reported using the Spring 2021 NWEA results for Cohorts 3 and 4 (7th and 8th grades).⁸ Schools indicated whether students were exceeding or meeting expectations based on their test scores for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. Four of the five schools also provided the total number of students in each category for comparative purposes.

As Figure 13 on the following page shows, Aspirations Incubator students were more likely to exceed expectations on the NWEA tests when compared with their peers. For example, 45% exceeded expectations in English Language Arts (compared with 29% of their peers); a similar pattern can be found for Math although the rates are lower. Without a baseline score prior to their engagement with the Aspirations Incubator it is hard to know whether the Aspirations Incubator students 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. However, 7th grade could be considered a baseline for Cohort 4 as they would have only a few months of programming. In that case, they seem to be starting off with higher scores than their peers.

⁸ Starting in 2021, the Maine Department of Education has partnered with the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) to provide an assessment for mathematics and English language arts/literacy to students in grades 3-8 and 3rd year of high school (grade 11).

Figure 13. Academic Achievement: Percent of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations – Aspirations Incubator Cohorts 3 & 4 Compared to Peers



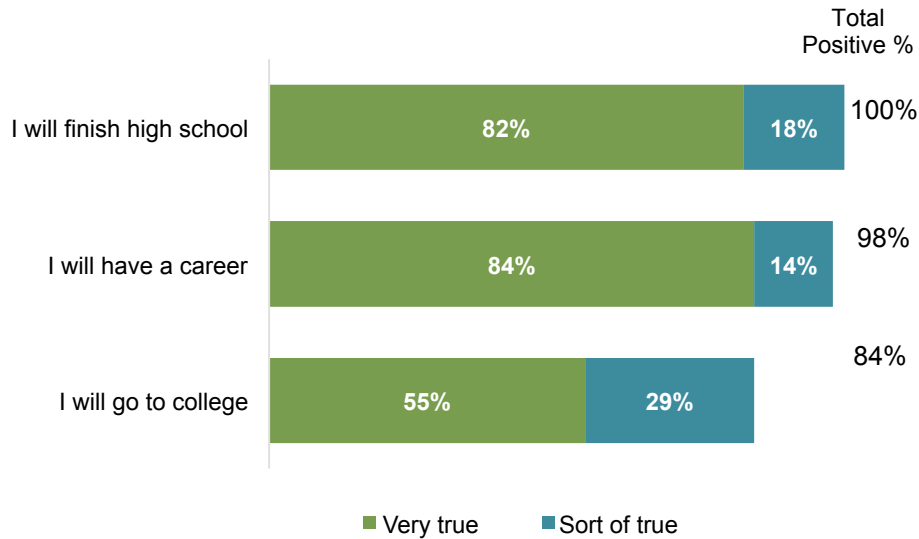
Aspirations

In terms of longer-term aspirations, the survey of 8th graders showed that the majority of students felt it was very true that they would finish high school (82%), and have a career (84%; see Figure 14). However, only 55% said it was very true they would go to college. This varied widely by site, from 20% to 83%. 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 (88% in 2018-19 and 62% in 2019, respectively).⁹

Only one of the 8th graders commented on how the program had affected their post-graduation plans; they wrote, “This program has helped me figure out what I want to do when I get older.” It is unclear though, if this impact was more a function of the career exploration the program did, or if the program also increased the student’s aspirations. For context, 92% of Cohort 3 sort of agreed or strongly agreed that they learned about jobs or careers they may want to have in their program.

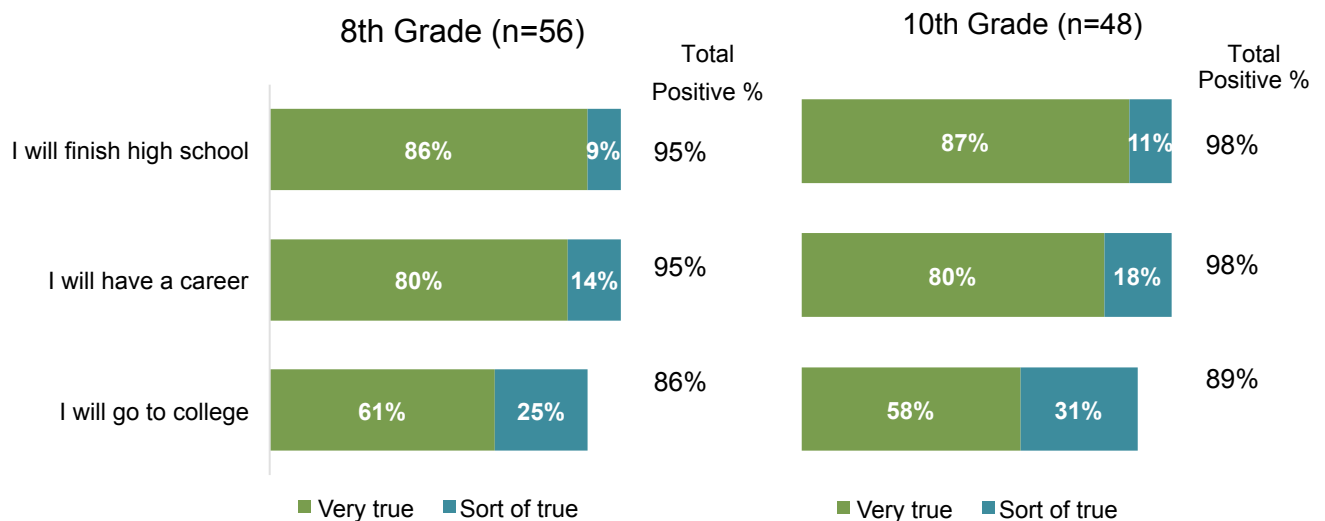
⁹ Maine Department of Education, Student Outcomes Data.
<https://www.maine.gov/doe/data-reporting/reporting/warehouse/outcomes>

**Figure 14. Measures of Aspiration:
Cohort 3 at 8th Grade**



For Cohort 1, 98% reported that it was sort of or very true that they would finish high school, and have a career (also 98%); 89% said they would go to college. As shown in Figure 15, each of these measures increased from the 8th grade survey, although the proportion that said it was *very true* they would go to college decreased slightly. However, despite these overall gains, the matched Cohort 1 students did not have the same result. In fact, the average response for “I will go to college” decreased significantly from 3.55 to 3.33 ($p \leq 0.05$). This means that the students’ decreased level of agreement with the statement in 10th grade was likely not due to chance alone.

**Figure 15. Measures of Aspiration:
Cohort 1 at 8th Grade and 10th Grade**



The AI Implementation Team had flagged aspirations as a concern after hearing growing anecdotes of students struggling with positive outlooks for their futures during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, we added a question to our key informant interview protocol to ask Program Managers about how the pandemic was affecting students, and specifically, their aspirations. Their responses varied somewhat; a couple said they thought the pandemic was clarifying for students. One Program Manager explained, “We have seen a large increase in in academic motivation and critical thinking and I don’t know if that is due to the pandemic. The pandemic has helped youth focus on what they want. If they have to choose between things, what do I need to do in order to get it...”

Others shared examples of how the pandemic had harmed students’ aspirations. One discussed how students felt overwhelmed and unprepared to carry out the college application process. They explained, “Cohort 1, the kids are so scared about applying to college, they didn’t take the PSATs, I don’t know if they are going to take the SATs this year. I’m trying to get them to share their experiences with COVID with the colleges and have the college understand what they have been through. The kids are having weekly meltdowns about it. I think some of the kids might feel kind of lost for a while.” Another Program Manager noted how the disruption to planned activities, like college tours, may have impacted student aspirations:

“Pre-COVID pretty much anytime we traveled we did college visits, since we had almost a 2-year gap now without doing that, my students desire to go to college has decreased. We used to come back from a campus visit and students would have a fire and energy about going to school. They got a little taste of what it feels like, and it made them start to feel more comfortable in their own skin. Graduating without those experiences will make them not think they can go to college.”

The Program Managers commented more on the immediate impact the pandemic is having on the older students, who are now trying to actualize plans shaped before and during the pandemic. However, the one Program Manager’s description of how the college tours inspired their students also underlines the importance of the early and consistent exposures to post-high school educational possibilities. The lack of these experiences could have a lasting effect on the younger cohorts as well.

“This program has helped me through some hard times and also helped me find what I want to do after graduating high school.”

10th GRADE STUDENT

“We used to come back from a campus visit and students would have a fire and energy about going to school.”

PROGRAM MANAGER

Site Attrition

As we have previously mentioned, by the conclusion of Year 4 three of the original eight Aspirations Incubator sites had dropped out of the pilot program. The departure of Apex Youth Connection (Trek2Connect) provides an opportunity to look more deeply at the site experiences to date and reflect on lessons learned. The following themes have emerged from an in-depth review of the site interviews and semi-annual reports, coupled with observations from previous years and the AI Implementation Team's own reflections. Although the circumstances surrounding each instance were in many ways unique, the following factors appear to play a role in the successful implementation of the program. While it is beyond our capacity to distinguish which of these factors are causal, or even untangle the interrelated dynamics that are at play, these themes lend insight into the challenges faced by the Aspirations Incubator programs and what contributes to ongoing success.

Two interconnected threads appear to be the most predictive of site success: buy-in and support for the model starting with leadership; and organizational stability. All three of the sites that departed the Aspirations Incubator experienced instability which manifested as either critical organizational transitions in leadership, the departure of key program staff, or both. Moreover, leadership at all three sites viewed the Aspirations Incubator as a standalone program that existed outside the established organizational programs rather than a new way of engaging in youth work that could transcend the Aspirations Incubator program. Indeed, all three proposed fundamental changes to the core program model at various points leading up to their departure. As one organizational leader stated, "it was irreconcilable differences between what they were going to fund and what we thought would work."

Certainly, other sites which have remained in the Aspirations Incubator have also experienced organizational instability in terms of shifting infrastructure, resources or staff departures; however, they weathered those challenges in part because leadership were fully invested in the Aspirations Incubator program model. As described in previous evaluation reports, that support manifested in terms of leadership understanding the key components of the program (e.g., 6-year cohorts, informal relationships, comprehensive approach, etc.); ensuring others in the organization were also aware of those concepts (knowledge management) so that the program's survival did not "live" with one individual; investing in the staffing and resources needed to support the program at an organizational level; changing organizational policies to support the Aspirations Incubator program; and focusing on longer-term sustainability early on.

Another aspect that has arisen as a fundamental component of Aspirations Incubator success is the strength of the program's relationship with the local school district(s) as evidenced through the engagement with school staff and leaders, programs' access to the school buildings, and even participation in evaluation activities to support the Aspirations Incubator program. While the importance of this relationship has been apparent since Year 1, it rises to the forefront as a factor contributing to attrition. Our analysis has found that the sites that left the Aspirations Incubator either had less of an established relationship or were more likely than others to convey ongoing challenges with school engagement. This is not to say that other sites did not also face challenges with the school relationship or shifts in school administration. However, in those instances, the organizational leadership supported the Program Manager and helped them to overcome those challenges; that is to say, fostering a strong school relationship was not left to the Program Manager to navigate alone.

As the AI Implementation Team looks ahead with an eye towards expanding the Aspirations Incubator to other organizations and school districts, this process of reflection and analysis points to needing a longer learning and planning period (e.g., 12 months) for organizational leadership and management staff, prior to hiring and launching a new program. Some important capacity considerations for potential new sites to take into

consideration during this period would be organizational policies and infrastructure, staff retention and transition, long-term sustainability, and school relationships across the 7th-12th grade span.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After completing four years of programming, the five Aspirations Incubator sites have served over 300 students from Maine's rural communities. While the evidence continues to grow that students experience real and measurable benefits from being part of an Aspirations Incubator program, the ongoing effects of the pandemic are taking their toll. Nonetheless, 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, while Program Managers shared ways in which they have helped students to navigate this unprecedented time. Moreover, on key factors that contribute to academic success – including attendance and standardized test scores – Aspirations Incubator students appear to be more successful than their peers.

Recommendations

Against the backdrop of the Year 4 successes, we offer the following recommendations as the Aspirations Incubator navigates the fifth year of program implementation.

For Aspirations Incubator Organizations and Programs

The first set of recommendations are provided with an eye towards what organizations and programs should be doing to implement the Aspirations Incubator over the final two 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 Aspirations Incubator programs.

- **Recommendation 1: Examine cohort gender distribution.** Year 4 recruitment showed a notable increase in female enrollment over male enrollment, driven in large part by two programs. While a single year may be an anomaly, this pattern warrants further discussion and exploration at each site. Are there barriers to male recruitment, engagement and enrollment? Does the gender distribution affect student needs and challenges upon entering the program? What about cohort cohesion or retention? These discussions and reflections may yield little or no change, but it is important to consider future recruitment efforts and the student selection process from this lens.
- **Recommendation 2: Build connection in the time of COVID.** The data for the latter two cohorts (Cohort 3 and Cohort 4) suggest the pandemic has interrupted the program's ability to build relationships and connection; they showed lower retention rates and lower growth in peer connection, although anecdotally they continued to voice strong positive connections as a result of the Aspirations Incubator. Indeed, many sites reflected how crucial the first two years were to building the cohesiveness of Cohorts 1 and 2 and that the latter two had very different experiences. As the programs begin to recruit a new cohort, it will be important for sites to explore and share new ways of connecting. Additionally, for Cohorts 3 and 4 they may need adapt their original program plans to include more activities in later years that focus on building group cohesion.
- **Recommendation 3. Refocus on expanding worldviews.** Expanding students' worldviews by exposing them to a diversity of people, places, and experiences is a critical component of the Aspirations Incubator model. Admittedly, this has been challenging to navigate during the pandemic, which saw programs shifting their focus onto meeting the acute needs of students and their families. Nonetheless, the student survey data from the past year suggests that fewer students were willing to try new things, and only about one-third strongly

agreed that they had interacted with people from different cultures as a result of the program. the on-going pandemic, program sites should continue to offer opportunities and experiences that will help students expand their horizons.

- **Recommendation 4: Focus on the experiences of non-White students.** Students of color may be having somewhat different experiences in the Aspirations Incubator compared to their peers. Although the findings presented in this report are based on relatively small numbers, it is nonetheless important to flag this topic as an area to explore in the coming year. The *Fair Treatment* and *Cultural Relevance* modules were collected as an equity initiative and should be used to help with that aspect of Aspirations Incubator programs. Sites should reflect on these results and consider their program goals through a diversity and inclusion lens. The AI Implementation Team can support these efforts through one-on-one coaching, and by offering group learning opportunities at the bi-annual Aspirations Incubator convenings.
- **Recommendation 5: Address college aspirations.** College aspirations appear to have suffered over the past year; Cohort 3 has lower rates of college aspirations compared with earlier cohorts, and among those students in Cohort 1 who answered both the 8th and 10th grade survey there was a statistically significant decrease in college aspirations. Clearly the pandemic has negatively affected this aspect of the program and Program Managers shared multiple examples, from students' stress about taking tests, to a general sense of upheaval. In the coming year, Aspirations Incubator programs need to address this challenge head-on by not just exposing students to college opportunities but by addressing students' concerns about post-secondary aspirations, whether they be related to affordability, health and safety, mental health or otherwise. The AI Implementation Team can support Aspirations Incubator sites by providing access to information, expertise, resources, and cross-site discussions.

For the AI Implementation Team

The remaining set of recommendations is offered to the AI Implementation Team 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 Trekkers Principles and help the Aspirations Incubator model expand its reach beyond the original sites.

- **Recommendation 1: Review and update fidelity targets.** This report has demonstrated the ongoing effects of COVID-19 in terms of recruitment, engagement, and retention; although not discussed at length in this report, the pandemic impact continues to manifest in terms of mentoring ratios, informal relationship building contact hours, activities and other participation as well. As COVID continues to disrupt every aspect of our lives, the AI Implementation Team should examine the fidelity and accountability targets developed earlier in the evaluation process, both in terms of numbers and timeframes, to appropriately reflect the challenges programs and students continue to face.
- **Recommendation 2: Focus on the future and what works.** At this point, five of the original eight sites have completed four years of the pilot program. There have been many lessons learned and documented during the first four years of the pilot, and a clearer picture of what it takes to implement the model has emerged. As the AI Implementation Team looks ahead towards program expansion, the time is right to work with the sites and the DIP to develop a readiness assessment for future programs and sites. A readiness assessment would serve as a self-reflection tool for organizations to determine whether they have the critical components necessary to implement the program model successfully, as well as pinpoint areas in which to build their capacity. Key topics should be leadership buy-in, organizational stability, knowledge management, risk management, volunteers and mentors, and school relationships.

Looking Ahead

This Year 4 shares the significant themes that emerged in the fourth year of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot programs (September 2020 to August 2021), focusing primarily on 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. Notably, while the impact of COVID-19 persists – particularly on retention and connection with the newer cohorts and college aspirations among Cohort 1 – there have still been impressive achievements. In the coming year, the evaluation will continue to monitor these impacts as well as the “return to normal.” We will also collect another round of student surveys which will improve our understanding of longer-term program affects on participants.