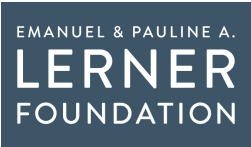# Aspirations Incubator:
Year One Evaluation Report

Prepared by the Data Innovation Project (DIP)
Cutler Institute of Health and Social Policy
The University of Southern Maine

DATA
INNOVATION
PROJECT

On behalf of the
Emanuel & Pauline A. Lerner Foundation

EMANUEL & PAULINE A.
LERNER
FOUNDATION

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Emanuel & Pauline A. Lerner Foundation's Aspirations Incubator is a six-year pilot initiative focused on strategic capacity building for eight youth development organizations in rural Maine. Grounded in the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, the Aspirations Incubator invests targeted resources to provide comprehensive mentoring-based programming. The goal of the program is to raise and sustain the post-secondary school aspirations of Maine students, focused on middle school children in rural areas and small cities. To document the potential impact and effectiveness of this unique funding model, the Lerner Foundation has contracted with the Data Innovation Project to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year implementation and outcomes evaluation.

This report reflects one year (September 2017 to August 2018) of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation and details emerging findings in program implementation and preliminary participant outcomes.

Methodology

This report summarizes information gathered from two semi-annual site reports (December 2017 and June 2018), 27 key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, and community stakeholders conducted in May and June 2018, and data from a self-report measure of social-emotional development for children and adolescents developed by the Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR) Institute. Qualitative data were coded and analyzed using NVivo software; quantitative data were analyzed using MS Excel to produce basic descriptive statistics. The findings in this report set the baseline for future analyses, both for trending this cohort over time and against which to compare other cohorts in their first year. Results should be considered preliminary and emerging.

Key Findings

Program Implementation

Across the eight sites, 534 students were engaged in recruitment efforts and 116 were ultimately enrolled in the first Cohort. Students enrolled in Cohort 1 predominantly identified as white and were evenly split between boys and girls, although one site enrolled all boys and one enrolled mostly girls. Relationships with regional school partners, community reputation, the length of the program model and parent engagement were consistently raised as both

barriers and facilitators to site-specific program implementation efforts including recruitment, engagement, and enrollment.

With support and guidance from the Lerner Foundation, Program Managers at each site worked within their unique communities to actualize the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles. The successes and challenges sites faced in the early process of implementation were dictated by learning curves, logistical and policy questions, and other concerns. Sites noted that organizational leadership, particularly with regard to clarity around risk management policies, consistently played a key role in program success in the first year.

Preliminary Student Outcomes (Cohort 1)

Sites implemented the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) tool with students to help determine the strengths, challenges and level of need of the students enrolled in the program and to inform individual student plans. The tool considers students' resilience, relationships, and learning and school engagement and identifies each as a strength, challenge, or typical skill development for the students' age. Each student is subsequently identified as in need of a low (Tier 1), moderate (Tier 2) or high (Tier 3) level of support. Based on the results of the tool, 42% of students were in Tier 1, 40% were in Tier 2, and 19% were in Tier 3. The proportion of students needing Tier 3 supports varied greatly by site, ranging from 7% to as high as 47%.

The Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective (HSA-R), which corresponds to the HSA, was completed at the end of the year. It requires students to reflect on their involvement with the program and report the extent to which the program influenced them positively or negatively based on a number of criteria. Overall, 96% of students who completed the HSA-R reported positive changes on three or more subscales as a result of their participation in the program. On measures of resilience, 82% of students reported a positive change in action orientation and 77% reported a positive change in empathy. Reflecting on positive relationships, more than 70% of students in Cohort 1 reported improvement in both adult and peer relationships. Results on measures related to learning and school engagement indicated that over 73% of students reported positive growth in critical thinking, learning interest, and academic motivation. According to students, school bonding was the lowest area of growth (50%), although some reported positive gains in this area.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This first annual report of the Aspirations Incubator shares the significant themes that emerged from the first year of implementation in eight rural Maine communities. Each site faced unique opportunities and challenges in recruitment, enrollment and program delivery that inform a number of recommendations to be considered for the subsequent years of implementation.

- **Reach out to high schools in the coming year.** All Aspirations Incubator sites noted that the local school(s) were a key partner in their success. Program Managers should reach out to their area high schools in the coming year to begin to develop and grow this important relationship.

- **Ensure a balanced mix of students.** Some sites enrolled a much larger proportion of high needs students in their first cohort than others. Program Managers should make sure that schools know the Aspirations Incubator is not just for high needs or at-risk students.

- **Continue building support for the program.** Program Managers noted that their organization's reputation in the community was helpful as a student recruitment tool; this will likely prove to be true when it comes to recruiting adult volunteers and peer mentors. Program Managers should continue to explore creative ways to get the word out about the Aspirations Incubator and engage students, parents, and the community.

- **Continue exploring organizational shifts to support the program.** Most programs did not report needing major changes to policy or procedures to support the Aspirations Incubator program. Program Managers and organizational leadership should consider who holds responsibility for maintaining fidelity to the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles and how to ensure the fundamental aspects of the program are held by the organization as a whole, rather than with just one person.

- **Continue to expand support for Aspirations Incubator sites.** Sites expressed a desire for more support around marketing their programs and communicating success as well as ongoing support and learning related to informal relationship building. To build organizational capacity and support sustainability, the Lerner Foundation may consider offering additional coaching and strategic planning support to program leadership.

Introduction

Middle school students are at an important developmental stage, when stable relationships with non-family supports can help them overcome challenges in their lives and increase engagement with school.[1] Programs that offer middle school students structured exploration and peer interaction, and take advantage of their willingness to try new things, can help them learn more about themselves and how they want to fit into the world around them.[2] While more than half of all school-aged children in Maine live in rural areas, many rural middle school students lack access to important resources that develop leadership skills and broaden their sense of what is possible.

In 2016, after six years of making grants to a number of different organizations throughout Maine, and following a year of research, planning, and partnership development, the Emanuel & Pauline A. Lerner Foundation decided to focus its resources on raising the aspirations of middle school students in rural Maine. In 2017, the Lerner Foundation announced the Aspirations Incubator, a six-year pilot initiative to build the capacity of eight 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 increasing resiliency in young people and introducing students growing up in rural Maine communities to new opportunities that may exist outside the focus of their everyday lives.

The grantee sites are located throughout the state of Maine, as shown. Each site is partnered with one local school district.

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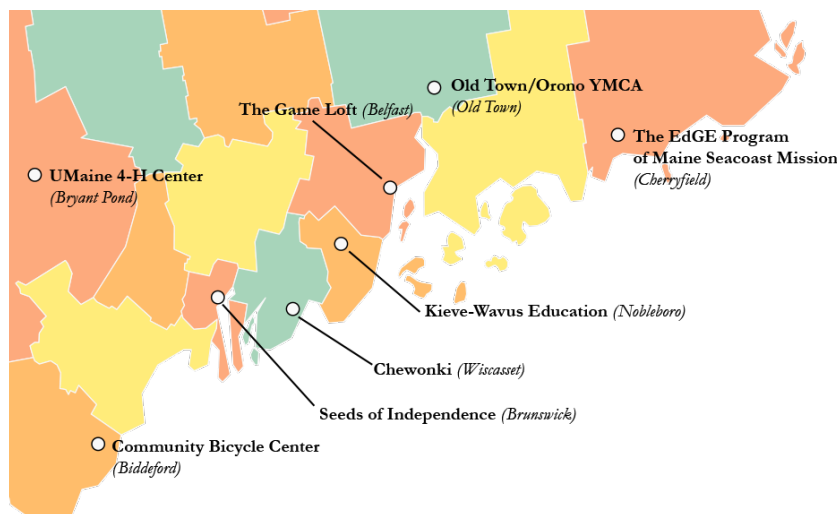
[1] Center for Promise (2015). *Don't quit on me: What young people who left school say about the power of relationships.* Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance.

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

Aspirations Incubator Grantees

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.
Community Bicycle Center	Trek2 Connect	The Community Bicycle Center in Biddeford is a free, year-round youth program that provides kids of all backgrounds with a safe place to connect with caring adults through bike rides and repairs.	Biddeford School Department	Biddeford
Kieve-Wavus Education	Kieve-Wavus Leads	Kieve-Wavus Education empowers people to contribute positively to society by promoting the values of kindness, respect for others, and environmental stewardship through year-round experiential programs, camps for youth and adults, and guidance from inspirational role models.	AOS 93	Bremen, South Bristol, Bristol, Damariscotta, Newcastle, Nobleboro, Jeffferson, Alna
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
Seeds of Independence	Roots	Seeds of Independence provides youth and teens ages 11-18 with peer and community mentors to reinforce self-worth, good decision making, and healthy lifestyle choices in order to become independent, productive members of our world.	Brunswick Public Schools	Brunswick
The EdGE Program of Maine Seacoast Mission	EdGE-Journey	Through after-school, in-school, and summer programs, EdGE offers children from Gouldsboro to Machias the opportunity to challenge themselves, engage with their communities and the outdoors, and explore college and career options.	SAD #37	Addison, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Harrington, Milbridge
The Game Loft	I Know ME	The Game Loft, based in Belfast, promotes positive youth development through non-electronic games and community involvement.	RSU #3	Brooks, Freedom, Jackson, Knox, Liberty, Monroe, Montville, Thorndike, Troy, Unity, Waldo
University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond	NorthStar	The University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond is dedicated to helping young people reach their fullest potential through affordable hands-on learning in the outdoors, in the classroom, and beyond.	SAD #44	Andover, Bethel, Gilead, Greenwood, Newry, Woodstock

The Aspirations Incubator is guided by the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, a youth development model developed by Trekkers, Inc, located in Rockland, Maine. The Youth Programming Principles are unique in their design because they focus on a continuous, long-term mentoring model that spans six years. The Trekkers model has made a difference in the lives of hundreds of students growing up in the small fishing communities of mid-coast Maine.

Trekkers Youth Programming Principles

1. Designing Intentional Program Delivery Systems for Long-Term Engagement

2. Developing a Skilled Network of Caring Adults and Peer Mentors

3. Applying a Comprehensive Approach to Youth Development Strategies

4. Creating a Community Support Network

5. Prioritizing Informal Relationship Building with Youth

6. Expanding Worldviews

7. Embracing Student Voice and Choice

8. Encouraging Civic Responsibility

9. Preparing Students for Success After High School

10. Utilizing Validated Assessment Tools to Promote Social-Emotional Development in Young People

Purpose of this Report

The Lerner Foundation has contracted with the Data Innovation Project (DIP) to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year evaluation of the Aspirations Incubator. This first annual report shares the significant themes that emerged from the first year of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot program (September 2017 to August 2018). The report reflects information gathered from two semi-annual site reports (December 2017 and June 2018), 27 key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, and community stakeholders conducted in May and June 2018, and data from the Holistic Student Assessment, a tool developed by the PEAR Institute: Partnerships in Education and Resilience. Qualitative data were coded and analyzed using NVivo software; quantitative data were analyzed using MS Excel to produce basic descriptive statistics. More information on the data sources and the analysis methods can be found at the end of this report.

The data collected reflect **one year** of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation and thus set the baseline for future analyses, both for trending this cohort over time and against which to compare other cohorts in their first year. This report does not explore differences observed among the sites or discuss fidelity to the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles; observed results should be considered preliminary and emerging. The first section of the report presents the findings related to program implementation. This is followed by a description of the participants and exploration of preliminary participant outcomes.

Program Implementation

This section describes the first year of program implementation—first, findings related to the recruitment and enrollment process; then findings about program delivery once Cohort 1 was established, organized by Principle; and finally, findings on changes to organizational structure to support the model. Note that at the time the interviews were conducted, some groups had met only a handful of times and many had significant activities planned for the following months.

Recruitment, Engagement & Enrollment

Most sites began recruitment efforts in the Fall of 2017, selected participants by December, and began programming by around mid-January 2018. In total, they reached out to approximately **534** students during recruitment and enrolled **116** (see next section for a profile of students). Each site employed a number of strategies to engage students, parents, and schools during the recruitment process. These strategies are discussed further in the context of recruitment barriers and facilitators below.

School relationships and school presence

The success of recruitment and program implementation was amplified by the strength of the sites' relationships with their regional school partners. Success in building rapport with schools increased the amount of contact they were able to have with interested students and current participants. Several sites already had established relationships with their schools prior to the start of the Aspirations Incubator. A few of those sites were even able to get physical office space and/or a homeroom classroom in their schools to aid the implementation of their Aspirations Incubator program. Though most sites were not physically embedded in the schools, some of their partner schools were still willing to accommodate the program's needs—whether that be to use space in the school for a meeting or to pop into a homeroom class to make a quick announcement to Aspirations Incubator students. Sites that did not have relationships with the schools at the outset of the program tended to have longer recruitment phases as Program Managers spent time during the fall months meeting with school leadership, attending events, volunteering, and getting to know students and teachers.

Known entity or reputation in community

Most sites struggled to market a program that did not exist yet; parents and students were not hearing about the program from social networks or word of mouth and turnout at information events was often low. One characteristic that appeared to lessen this challenge was whether the program's parent organization was already a known entity in the community. This advantage is exemplified by the following quote from organizational leadership: "when [the Program Manager] started reaching out to the schools we picked very strategic moments for me to be there…to come across as credible and committed. The advantage we had is that most families knew [the organization] and assumed we would have quality programs." However, in some instances when organizations were well known, schools or parents had trouble understanding how different the Aspirations Incubator program was from the programs already offered by the organization.

> "I am really excited to see a long-term mentoring program. One of the challenges we have seen in mentoring programs is they are usually a one-off. Like a college will come in and they are in for two months and then they are gone. I think a longitudinal program is really exciting."
> —School Principal

Six-year engagement model

Many sites found that the expectation of a six-year commitment was a barrier to recruiting participants, adult and peer mentors, and engaging parents. As one site explained in their semi-annual report, "We discovered that most 7th graders do not respond to the word 'cohort,' don't want to attend 'meetings,' and are

overwhelmed with the idea of committing to a six-year program." Conversely, several community stakeholders listed the Aspirations Incubator's long-term investment as one of its strengths and what sets the program apart from others. One school principal explained, "I am really excited to see a long-term mentoring program. One of the challenges we have seen in mentoring programs is they are usually a one-off. Like a college will come in and they are in for two months and then they are gone. I think a longitudinal program is really exciting."

Parent engagement

Engaging parents in the program was challenging for most sites. This was evident during recruitment, when getting them to sign and return forms, or asking them to volunteer their time for activities. One site described how they spent significant time simply building trust with parents, since most had never interacted with the program and did not know the staff. Nonetheless, several sites and their community stakeholders listed parental involvement and buy-in as a success after the first year of implementation. Program Managers reported receiving positive emails, a growing sense of buy-in for the program, and that parents are showing up at events. One school principal said the way their local Aspirations Incubator program worked to build buy-in with parents was what set the program apart from others.

Program Delivery

Once Aspirations Incubator sites engaged their first cohort of students, they began holding meetings, activities, and outings designed to complement and align with the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles. The Lerner Foundation developed a Fidelity and Accountability framework with clearly defined targets for each of the ten Youth Programming Principles and a timeline for expected benchmarks. The Lerner Foundation's Senior Program Officer served as a guide and sounding board for Program Managers at each site as they worked to implement their programs with fidelity to the Youth Programming Principles. He also offered ongoing support and training to Program Managers in one-on-one and whole group settings, and the Lerner Foundation convened its grantees twice during the year for peer learning, trainings, and discussion about how to implement the Youth Programming Principles.

Below, we share examples of how implementation of the Principles manifested in the first year of programming.

Principle 2: Developing a Network of Caring Adults and Peer Mentors

All sites created pathways for adult and peer mentors in their programming in the first year of implementation. Sites focused on recruiting adult and peer mentors and began to incorporate them into their cohort outings and excursions. In 2018, sites recruited **104** new adult volunteers and **15** new peer mentors, and they worked with **120** total adult volunteers and **39** total peer mentors. Mentors helped out at ski and snowboarding community days, river trips, nature

What is the PEAR Institute?

The PEAR Institute (Partnerships in Education and Resilience) was founded in 1999 to promote innovation in education. Its work is founded on a belief that high-quality programming can build youth social-emotional resiliency and contribute to school and life success.

The Institute developed the **Clover Model of Youth Development** as a framework to help understand human developmental needs. It highlights four essential elements that people of all ages need in order to thrive, learn, and develop Active Engagement, Assertiveness, Belonging, and Reflection. By identifying the basic needs that individual youth have in these areas, programs can be designed to intentionally meet those needs and nourish strengths.

The PEAR Institute created the **Holistic Student Assessment (HSA)** to be used with the Clover Model. The HSA provides a social-emotional portrait of the unique strengths and challenges of each young person that can be used to tailor programming.

The Aspirations Incubator relies on these tools to inform its work, particularly providing a comprehensive approach to youth programming and using a validated assessment tool to gauge strengths and needs.

For more information, visit thepearinstitute.org.

walks, a field trip to a botanical garden, an escape room, and a variety of other outings.

Sites tended to experience greater success recruiting one type of mentor over the other (adult vs. peer), and almost all had better success recruiting mentors for short engagement periods than finding volunteers and mentors who were ready to make a long-term commitment. This likely reflects the fact that sites and staff relied on existing pools established by their parent organization to recruit mentors (e.g., student mentoring groups), or tapped into personal connections made through previous jobs or roles in the organization (e.g., a prior relationship with a university social work program), rather than creating an entirely new network. Some sites were unsure whether they could recruit older students from other programs in the organization to serve as mentors for the Aspirations Incubator, which may have limited their student mentor involvement.

Other challenges arose when the parent organizations did not have a history of working with volunteers and thus had to build out organizational policies and procedures to support that work (discussed in greater detail below). In addition, sites that took longer to recruit and enroll students reported less mentor and volunteer engagement, because they simply had fewer opportunities to include volunteers or mentors. As one Program Manager stated, "We are just beginning to do that. This program really began in [early spring]...That's going to be a big focus now."

Principle 3: Applying a Comprehensive Approach to Youth Development Strategies

Principle 10: Utilizing Validated Assessment Tools to Promote Social-Emotional Development in Young People

The Trekkers Youth Programming Principles define a comprehensive approach as one that incorporates targeted, holistic youth development methods into the program to help young people find success and navigate challenges, and that focuses on proven promotion, prevention and intervention strategies.

The sites use the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) to collect information about each student's social-emotional development and resiliency at the start of the program. This tool was developed by The PEAR Institute: Partnerships in Education and Resilience and supports the Clover Model of Youth Development, a comprehensive approach to youth programming (see sidebar). The assessment identifies strength and challenge areas for each student, which Program Managers then use to compile an individual plan to build on those strengths in the coming year, either through individual support or group activities (for more information on the HSA, see Appendix B). In the first Cohort, 113 students completed the HSA (97% of all students enrolled). Most Program Managers reported that administering the HSA was fairly easy, particularly when done online during a set aside period of time, and when some sort of incentive was offered (e.g., food or a fun game).

Most Program Managers, however, found it much harder to interpret the results and craft the individual plans. For example, some found that the results did not seem to line up with how they viewed their group (e.g., less action orientation reported than they observed) or they were not sure how to craft a useful individual plan. Those Program Managers relied heavily on coaching provided by the Lerner Foundation for support.

> "One thing we didn't quite notice in the beginning was how active our group of kids are as a whole. Looking at HSA, being able to see that trend helped us come up with activities they can engage in more easily."
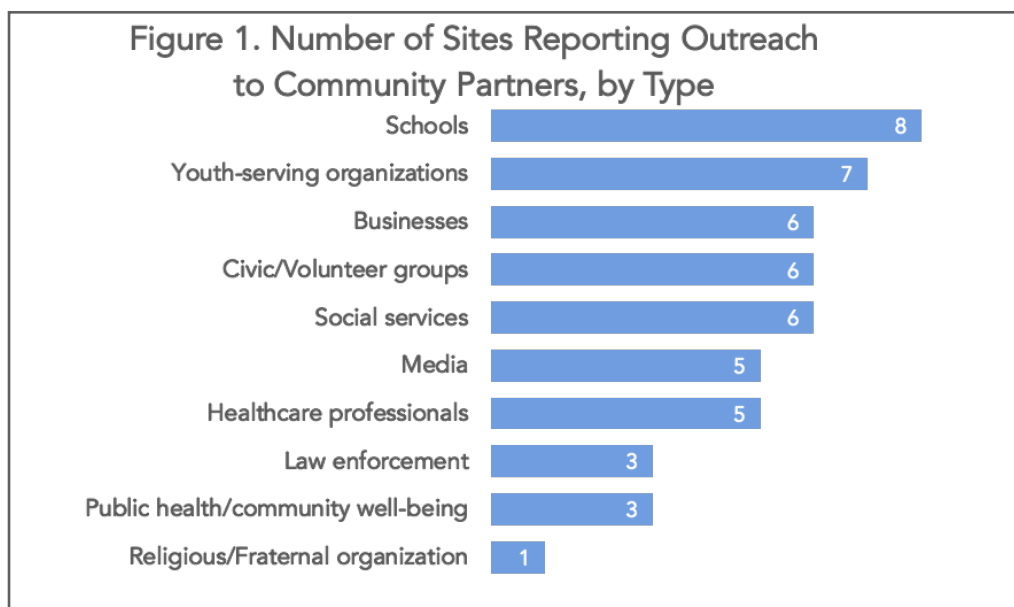> —Program Manager

Nonetheless, all the sites found the HSA useful and provided numerous instances in which they were able to tailor programming or facilitate the group more effectively as a result. Sites used findings from the HSA to inform activities for the whole group; for example, one group was low on the critical thinking scale, so their Program Manager incorporated some problem solving-focused team building activities. Another said, "One thing we didn't quite notice in the beginning was how active our groups of kids are as a whole. Looking at HSA, being able to see that trend helped us come up with activities they can engage in more easily."

Program Managers also used HSA results to tailor one-on-one activities and inform how they allocated time for Informal Relationship Building. Two sites even paired students based on their strengths and challenges; for instance, one Program Manager talked about strategically arranging students to mix those who were naturally outgoing with those who were not, and observed how those students forged new friendships over the year. Another shared an instance in which they matched a student who was naturally active with another who was still learning to ride a bicycle.

Principle 4: Creating a Community Support Network

To assemble support networks for young people, sites are asked to partner with parents, schools, key stakeholders, health services, and other community partners to build high-level supports to meet needs of students (both academic and non-academic). All sites reported strengthening their relationships with local schools, which was tied into the recruitment process. They also reported reaching out to local youth-serving organizations, businesses, social service providers, and healthcare professionals (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of Sites Reporting Outreach to Community Partners, by Type

Partner Type	Number of Sites
Schools	8
Youth-serving organizations	7
Businesses	6
Civic/Volunteer groups	6
Social services	6
Media	5
Healthcare professionals	5
Law enforcement	3
Public health/community well-being	3
Religious/Fraternal organization	1

There was less evidence of expanding the community support network beyond these areas, and fewer instances of engaging with partners strategically to support a young person. Most sites did not report instances of supporting students at a higher level. Of the sites that did support students in this manner, most circumstances were about connecting a student to a greater level of mental health support, such as to school counseling or a private practice. In some cases, the Program Manager became an informal support; for example, checking in with a student, visiting them while out of school, helping parents, or speaking with counselors.

However, one site that was engaged in this level of support noted, "That is our struggle – sometimes we are not equipped to deal with the depths of our relationship in its entirety." Another Program Manager echoed this sentiment and expressed gratitude for the support they received from internal and school-based health and student support teams.
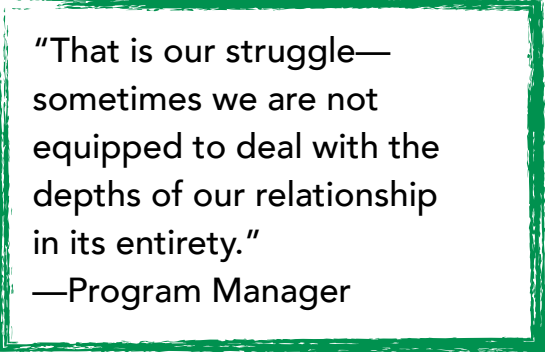
Principle 5: Prioritizing Informal Relationship Building

Informal relationship building centers on interacting with youth people outside of regular scheduled programming, and maintaining those relationships even when core programs are not in

> "That is our struggle—sometimes we are not equipped to deal with the depths of our relationship in its entirety."
> —Program Manager

session. Sites spent **801** Informal Relationship Building contact hours with students in Year One. (In understanding this number, it is critical to note that how contact time was defined, understood, and reported varied by site in the first year of implementation. The Lerner Foundation has since clarified these definitions across the sites, which will be reflected in Year Two.)

Program Managers with a consistent school presence appeared to find implementing their informal relationship building easier. Having regular access to students enabled them to have one-on-one lunches and meetings, hang out after school to help students with homework, and to be available for when a student just wanted to drop in and talk. One Program Manager regularly volunteered to chaperone school events as a way to get more face time with students and build positive rapport with the schools. Though being embedded in a school facilitates informal relationship building, many Program Managers connected with students outside that context. Program Managers would offer to drive a student home and get ice cream on the way, take a couple of students out fishing, or attend a student's basketball game.

Sites experienced varying levels of comfort implementing informal relationship building right away. For some Program Managers, the relationship-building piece happened naturally; for others it felt forced and out of step with the pace and culture of their cohorts. Many focused first on being present and available to the students outside of program meetings, and just getting to know them, before suggesting one on one time; some had not even offered one on one time by the end of the school year.

As one site reflected, "It feels contrived because we are just getting to know them. It is funny to hang one-on-one. Instead, I am just present at school." Another described it as, "getting over the awkward hump of spending one-on-one time with an adult." In addition, many sites had to develop internal policies to support the work while weighing concerns around risk management. One site prohibited private, one-on-one encounters as a way to control for these potential risks. Gender appeared to play a role in some of these policy changes and
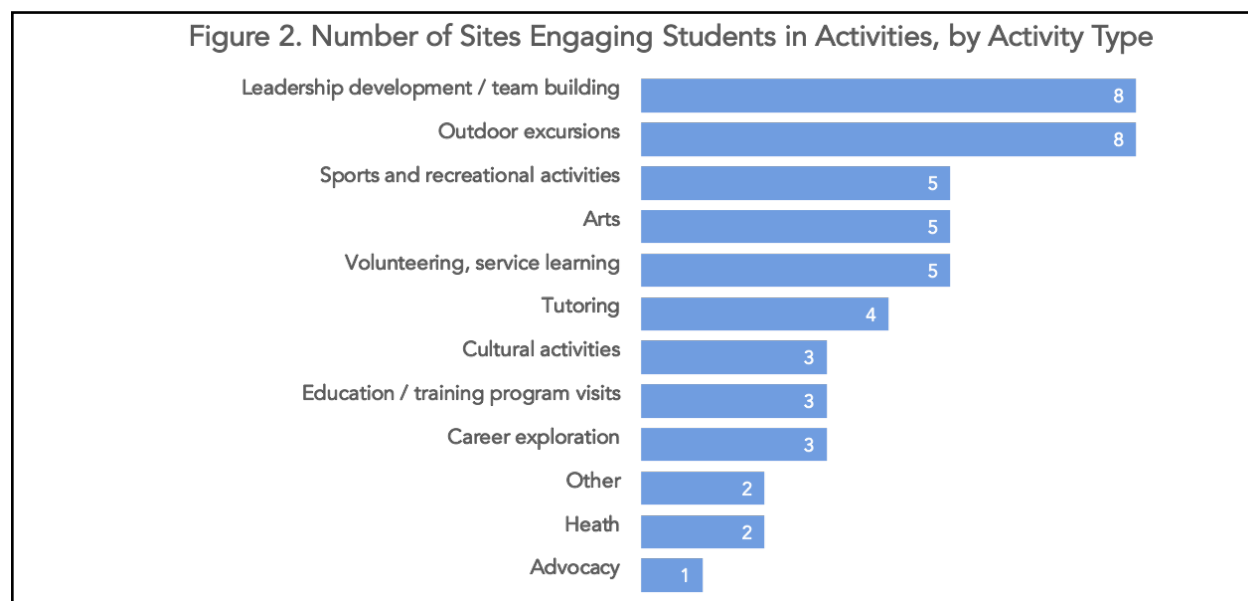
programmatic discomforts. Specifically, younger male Program Managers have either received some push back from parents/students or voiced apprehensions about how to support girls in their program.

Principle 6: Expanding Worldviews

Principle 8: Encouraging Civic Responsibility

The Youth Programming Principles call on sites to introduce students to demographic, experiential, and cognitive diversity through hands-on, travel-based or outdoor educational opportunities. They also incorporate service projects into the curriculum to promote civic engagement. Through these activities, the programs increase opportunities for participants to identify, explore, and cultivate future aspirations. To expand students' worldviews, civic engagement, and enhance aspirations, Aspirations Incubator sites engaged in a wide range of activities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of Sites Engaging Students in Activities, by Activity Type

Activity Type	Number of Sites
Leadership development / team building	8
Outdoor excursions	8
Sports and recreational activities	5
Arts	5
Volunteering, service learning	5
Tutoring	4
Cultural activities	3
Education / training program visits	3
Career exploration	3
Other	2
Heath	2
Advocacy	1

Every site reported holding at least one leadership and team development activity in the first year, as well as at least one outdoor excursion. On average, sites engaged students in six different types of activities. These included sports and recreational activities, arts, volunteering, and service learning. For example, various trips included three days and nights in Acadia National Park, swimming and rock climbing at University of Maine at Orono, Sea Dogs baseball games, volunteering at local animal shelters, a visit to the Maine State House, kayaking and canoeing, a visit to the Botanical Gardens in Boothbay Harbor, escape rooms, and snowshoeing. Several Program Managers and volunteers also shared how the excursions amplified peer and adult relationship building. One Program Manager noted, "there are a lot of successes around the trips and the relationship building leading up to the trip."

Principle 7: Embracing Student Voice and Choice

Incorporating youth voice and choice ensures that each student's voice is heard, respected, and valued by turning over parts of the educational process to students, letting students design elements of the program, and allowing students to create the policies that govern the program.

Program Managers offered many examples of how they incorporated youth voice and choice, ranging from selecting trip menus to picking excursion destinations. One site described how the students helped to raise money for a trip by holding bake sales and soliciting contributions. While most manifestations of this Principle were transactional in nature (i.e. picking trip meals), some moved further in the direction of power sharing: in one case, students set the group's norms and code of conduct using consensus-based decision-making. While this level of engagement is appropriate for a group of 7th graders who are still getting to know one another, the challenge for sites moving forward will be to promote this Principle in ways that are more empowering for older students.

Organizational Changes to Support the Model

Most sites did not describe many significant changes to their organization's internal protocols or policies to support the new Aspirations Incubator. The largest change reported by multiple programs was around risk management policies, particularly to support Informal Relationship Building—for example, allowing staff to transport students alone in car, or allowing staff to be alone with a student. As one stated, "How do we meet with the kids one-to-one when we don't have policies for that?"

> "I wish there had been more conversations around policy and risk management and what was mandatory and what would be up to the discretion of the organization."

Others needed changes related to volunteer policies, such as needing to develop an application form and conduct background checks. One site had to make a policy change to allow boys and girls to go camping together. Upon reflection, a leader at one of the organizations said, "I wish there had been more conversations around policy and risk management and what was mandatory and what would be up to the discretion of the organization." However, Program Managers also described many instances of working collaboratively with their business offices to make sure organizational policies and the Aspirations Incubator's requirements and expectations were aligned.

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What was clear across all sites is the pivotal role that organizational leadership plays in the program's success. Representatives from the sites described how the organizations handled shifting policies, procedures, or resources, or helping Program Managers during recruitment; some organizational leaders even took an active role in the program's expeditions. It was not immediately apparent after the first year the extent to which the Program Managers were able to disseminate their deep knowledge of the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles to other individuals within the organization. Ensuring that more than one person understands the core components upon which the program is built, and creating pathways for that information to be shared, will be critical to both new staff on-boarding and safeguarding program sustainability in the future.

Participants & Preliminary Outcomes (Cohort 1)

As noted previously, this report compiles data collected after only the first year of of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation. In this early stage, the evaluation has focused on research questions about how the Aspirations Incubator pilot project has been implemented across the sites. For the first year, we have used findings from the Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective (HSA-R) to share preliminary student outcomes related to priority social-emotional concepts measured by the HSA-R questionnaire. In some cases, findings about social-emotional concepts were supported by the semi-annual reports and key informant interviews with program staff and community stakeholders. These findings are incorporated where they are relevant. In coming program years, the Data Innovation Project will implement additional data collection methods, including supplemental surveys and site observations, to directly assess student outcomes related to participation in the Aspirations Incubator.

The following section describes the first cohort of students and presents evidence of short-term gains observed after one year of program involvement.
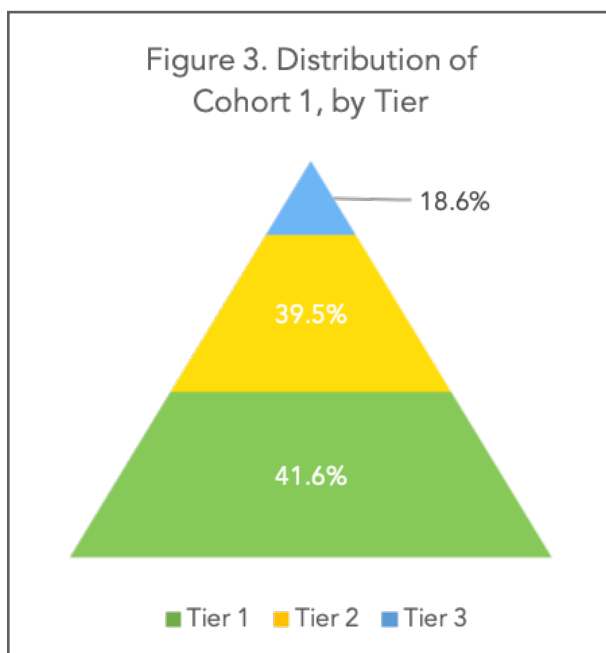
Student Characteristics, Strengths, and Challenges

During the first programming year, Aspirations Incubator sites enrolled **116** students in Cohort 1. Table 1 shows the enrollment by site for 2017-18. The cohort was evenly split between boys and girls, although there was some variation by site; notably, one site enrolled only boys, while another enrolled mostly girls. Of those students who reported their race, the majority of students said they were White (84%), 6 percent reported being more than one race, and the remainder was split among African American, American Indian and Asian. For comparison, Maine's population is 94% White.

Table 1. Enrollment by Site and Gender Distribution			
Site	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**
Bryant Pond 4-H Center	14	43%	57%
Chewonki	20	60%	35%
Community Bicycle Coalition	10	40%	60%
The Game Loft	10	100%	0%
Kieve-Wavus Education	16	56%	44%
Old Town-Orono YMCA	17	41%	59%
Maine Seacoast Mission - EdGE	15	27%	73%
Seeds of Independence	14	50%	50%

The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) is comprised of 61 questions spanning 14 subscales and grouped into three areas of life skills: Resilience, Relationships, and Learning and School Engagement. Students are asked to respond to each question on a scale, and their responses are averaged across all items in the subscale to determine whether the subscale represents a strength, a challenge, or if it is considered "normal."

The HSA also contains a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which assesses positive and negative aspects of behavior and indicates whether additional interventions are needed. Students are identified as in need of low (Tier 1), moderate (Tier 2), or high (Tier 3) levels of support depending on the number of strengths and challenges they exhibit. Students in Tier 1 exhibit primarily strengths and have few challenges, while Tier 3 students have more challenges and are approaching (or in) crisis. According to PEAR, Tier 3 students may need specialized intervention. This information is used by Program Managers to create an individual plan that tailors programming and interventions to meet students' unique needs.

Figure 3. Distribution of Cohort 1, by Tier

18.6%

39.5%

41.6%

■ Tier 1   ■ Tier 2   ■ Tier 3

At the outset of the program, Cohort 1 presented a number of strength and challenge areas, averaging **3.7 strengths areas** and **3.0 challenge areas** across all sites (a few sites had more than four challenge areas on

average). The most common student strengths were relationships with peers, trust, academic motivation, emotion control, and empathy. The most common challenges were critical thinking, action orientation, hyperactivity/inattention, reflection, and assertiveness.

Overall, 42 percent of Cohort 1 fell into Tier 1, and almost as many were in Tier 2 (40%) as shown in Figure 3. Nineteen percent were in Tier 3, the highest level of need. The proportion of Tier 3 students varied greatly by site, ranging from 7 percent to as high as 47 percent. This corresponded to the average number of strengths and challenges at each site.
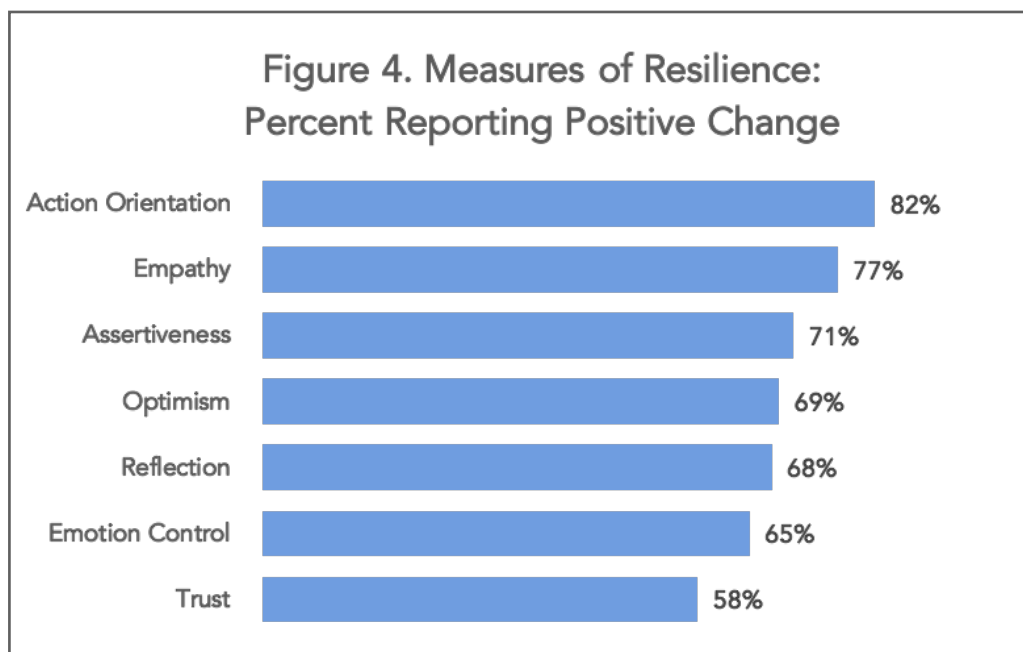
Preliminary Outcomes

The Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective (HSA-R) contains 61 items that correspond to the HSA and is completed at the end of the year (students are not asked the SDQ questions again). It asks students to reflect on their involvement with the program and report the extent to which the program influenced them positively or negatively for each criterion. As previously noted, 101 students in Cohort 1 (87% of those enrolled) completed the HSA-R assessment.

Overall, **96 percent of students who completed the HSA-R reported positive changes on three or more subscales of the HSA** as a result of their participation in the program.

Growth in Resilience

Eighty-two percent of students reported positive change in the area of **Action Orientation**, (engagement in physical and hands-on activities). This was followed by positive growth in terms of **Empathy** (recognition of other's feelings and experiences) at 77 percent, and **Assertiveness**

Figure 4. Measures of Resilience:
Percent Reporting Positive Change

|	
Action Orientation	82%
Empathy	77%
Assertiveness	71%
Optimism	69%
Reflection	68%
Emotion Control	65%
Trust	58%

(confidence in putting oneself forward, advancing personal beliefs, wishes or thoughts and in standing up for what one believes) at 71 percent. Figure 4 shows the full range of positive growth on these measures. There were some differences by gender, with girls being more likely to report growth in terms of **Assertiveness** (79% compared to 64%), and boys being more likely to report growth in **Trust** (perception of other people as helpful and trustworthy; boys reported 66% compared to 50% among girls).

One adult mentor provided an example of positive changes that they observed in a student around resilience: "There was one student in particular that I was concerned about—she has a hard family life. I would say that she has an increased capacity to see her own skills and to see the value of her activities and what she can contribute to them … That was a very intentional thing that [the Program Manager] helped support. This young woman has resilience but she is still learning about more than survival—how to have a richer life because of [the Aspirations Incubator]."

Growth in Positive Relationships

The HSA-R focuses on two sets of relationships: those with peers and those with adults. Despite the challenges noted by some sites with informal relationship building and recruiting adult volunteers, the majority of students in Cohort 1 reported improvements in their adult relationships, as seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Measures of Relationships: Percent Reporting Positive Change

Peer — 76%

Adult — 72%
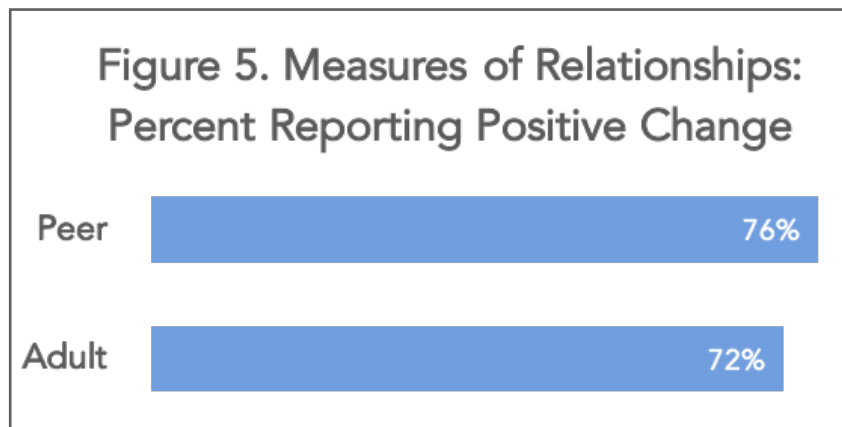
Even more reported having improved peer relationships (76%). There was very little difference between responses from boys versus girls in this life skill area. The Program Managers offered similar observations, and many noted that the group of students seemed to bond or develop deeper friendships over the course of the year.
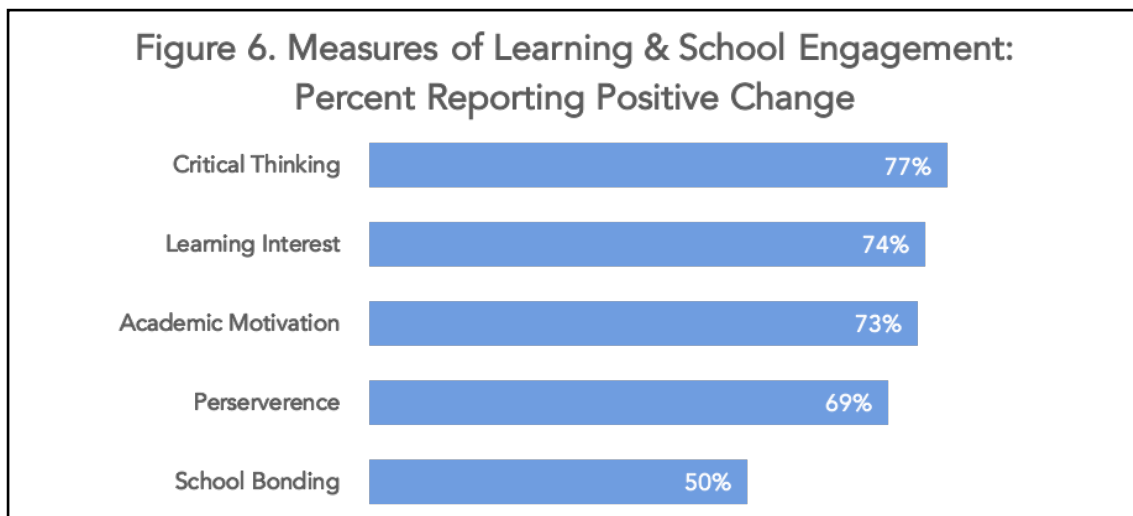
As one Program Manager stated, "The cohort has been extremely successful at building relationships. Many new friendships have grown. Mentor/youth relationships are extremely strong." Adult volunteers relayed similar observations, with one offering, "In the trip I noticed this one kid … is normally quiet and reserved ... And since we were in the middle of nowhere

with no phone service he couldn't play on his phone all the time, you could see him really come out of his shell and interact with us more ... I think a lot of these kids wouldn't be friends with each other in school if they hadn't been in this program."

Growth in Learning and School Engagement

The final area of life skills measured by the HSA-R relates to learning and school engagement. Figure 6 shows that students reported the most positive growth in terms of **Critical Thinking** (examination of information, exploration of ideas, and independent thought) at 77 percent, **Learning Interest** (desire to learn and acquire new knowledge) at 74 percent, and **Academic Motivation** (incentive to succeed in school) at 73 percent. Girls were more likely than boys to report growth in **Academic Motivation** (79% compared to 68% among boys).

"…I think a lot of these kids wouldn't be friends with each other if they hadn't been in this program."
—Adult Volunteer

Figure 6. Measures of Learning & School Engagement: Percent Reporting Positive Change

Critical Thinking	77%
Learning Interest	74%
Academic Motivation	73%
Perserverence	69%
School Bonding	50%

Although **School Bonding** (positive personal connections and the sense of belonging in one's school) was the lowest area of growth, some sites reported positive gains in this area. At one site, multiple stakeholders shared the story of a student who was sent to the principal's office frequently for behavior issues prior to joining the program. Both the Program Manager and the principal reported improvements in that student by the end of the year: "Office referrals have gone down to a minimum level. There is definitely a correlation with [student] being in the program."

Principals from two other Aspirations Incubator sites also noticed changes in how the students related to school and academics. One explained, "There were a handful of students, you could see them making significant gains, certainly academically but mostly socially-emotionally. There are some students who wouldn't speak in class, but by the end they presented to the school board."

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the first year, the Aspirations Incubator programs successfully enrolled and supported over 100 students. They reported on a wide range of unique and meaningful program activities through which participants had new experiences and built friendships with peers and adults.

Program Managers forged new or stronger relationships with schools, often becoming a valued presence, and they reached out to many community partners to help build their programs.

Program Managers also created individual plans for how to work with each student based on their unique strengths and challenges, and they logged numerous hours building one-on-one relationships. **By the end of the first year, almost all students reported positive growth in more than one area.**

"This group of kiddos are much more involved in school: more outgoing and willing to share, better at school, attendance increased, [they are] proud of their opportunities and experiences… Talking to their parents, they want to come to school."
—School Principal

With success also comes an opportunity for lessons learned. In 2019, sites are refining their recruitment efforts, rethinking the core components of their programs, changing how they administer assessments, and working on ways to expand their peer and adult volunteer bases. More generally, the evaluation yielded some insights for the work going forward, offered here for consideration.

Reach out to high schools in the coming year.

All Aspirations Incubator sites noted that the local school(s) were a key partner in their success. A few noted that they do not have strong relationships with their local high schools; this was particularly true for programs based in organizations that had not previously served older adolescents. Given the importance of school relationships cited by all the Aspirations Incubator sites, Program Managers should reach out to their area high schools in the coming year to grow that relationship, rather than starting when Cohort 1 enters ninth grade. This will likely ease the transition for the students, programs and the schools.

Ensure a balanced mix of students.

Some sites enrolled a much larger proportion of high needs students in their first cohort than others. The program is designed to attract a range of students from all three tiers to support peer mentoring and a stable, diverse group dynamic. In the second year, Program Managers should think about how they can **ensure a balanced mix of students across the three tiers of**

the HSA assessment. Program Managers should make sure the schools know that the Aspirations Incubator is not just for high needs or at-risk students.

Continue building support for the program.

Program Managers noted that their organization's reputation in the community was helpful as a student recruitment tool; this will likely become true for recruiting adult volunteers and peer mentors. In the second year, Program Managers should continue to **explore creative ways to get the word out** about the Aspirations Incubator and engage students, parents and the community. They should also make sure they **network with key community organizations** and partners to continue building their community of support (rather than reaching out only when a student is in need).

Continue exploring organizational shifts to support the program.

Most programs did not report needing major changes to policy or procedures to support the Aspirations Incubator program. When changes occurred, they typically revolved around risk management or rules for volunteers. Going forward, Program Managers and organizational leadership should **consider who holds responsibility for maintaining fidelity to the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles**.

Similarly, they should **think critically about the extent to which the program's success relies upon one person's institutional knowledge**, and start thinking about how to share that knowledge with other (and future) staff. Not sharing the responsibility of integrating the Aspirations Incubator culture among leadership and other organizational staff will limit the organization's capacity to weather potential disruptions such as staff turnover.

Continue to expand support for Aspirations Incubator sites.

This first-year evaluation revealed some areas where further support from the Lerner Foundation or the Trekkers Training Institute might be warranted in the coming year. First and foremost, all the sites (and many community stakeholders) expressed a desire for more support around **marketing their programs and communicating success** to their communities in creative and appealing ways. This was true even for sites that were well established in the community.

Informal relationship building continued to be challenging for some sites. This ranged from challenges with actually establishing those relationships to the self-care that Program Managers needed when supporting higher need students. Program Managers also expressed concern about providing adequate support and **prioritizing one-on-one relationship building with twice as many students** once their second cohorts were recruited. More than one Program Manager wanted to learn **ways to maintain their own wellbeing** while helping students facing crisis or serious challenges.

These immediate needs for support tied into broader concerns about program capacity and sustainability. Organizational leaders are already thinking about future staffing needs and funding sources as the program grows. Some wondered whether **coaching and strategic planning support** from the Lerner Foundation could help sites start crafting plans to secure additional funding now and in the future.

Looking Ahead

This annual report shares the significant themes that emerged from the first year of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot programs (September 2017 to August 2018), focusing primarily on the extent to which programs operated as intended and any lessons learned around implementation. Over the course of the next five years, the annual reports will continue to synthesize the current data sources, as well as incorporate an increasing number of new data sources gathered as the evaluation is implemented. Moreover, as the programs grow and serve more participants, we will be able to draw stronger conclusions about who is being served by the Aspirations Incubator, tease out differences based on site characteristics or implementation practices, and explore the extent to which programs rooted in the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles yield measurable positive effects on participants and their communities over the longer term.

Appendix A: Methods and Data Source Notes

The overall Aspirations Incubator evaluation design employs a mixed methods approach that utilizes qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the program's implementation and progress towards stated goals. In this first annual report three data sources were used: 27 key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, and community stakeholders; two Aspirations Incubator semi-annual site reports (December 2017 and June 2018); and information data from the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) and Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective (HSA-R). Qualitative data from the interviews and open-response questions of the site reports were coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Quantitative data from the site reports and the HSA and HSA-R were analyzed using MS Excel to produce basic descriptive statistics. Below are fuller descriptions of each of the data collection methods used:

Key Informant Interviews

All Program Managers and at least one individual from the leadership of each organization were solicited to participate in interviews. A list of potential community stakeholders to interview was generated from the first round of interviews with staff. Program Managers helped the Evaluation Team make contact with those individuals and a second round of interviews were conducted. Program Managers and organizational leaders were asked the same set of questions about the first year of recruitment and implementation, both its successes and challenges, recommendations, and to learn about the site's future program plans. Community stakeholders were asked a different set of questions that sought to learn about their experiences with the program, the successes and challenges they saw, and what their recommendations were, if any. The University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board approved all interview protocols.

Semi-Annual Site Reports

Site reports were developed to track program process and quality counts around recruitment and enrollment, attendance, program activities, program development, outreach, and staffing. They also garner open response feedback about the site's successes and lessons learned, and whether they need any additional support. Site reports are collected from grantees every 6 months, the two reporting periods are December – May and June – November. The reports are collected through the SurveyMonkey.com platform and Excel Workbooks and PDF files are extracted for analysis. Descriptive statistics are done within Excel and the PDF reports are imported into NVivo for qualitative analysis.

Holistic Student Assessment Data

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

Appendix B: Holistic Student Assessment Details

The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) measures 14 constructs that group into 3 categories of life skill (listed below). It consists of 61 core questions, plus the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The SDQ provides an initial, brief behavioral screen for 11-16 year olds. Developed by Robert Goodman, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, the SDQ assesses positive and negative aspects of behavior and indicates whether additional or preliminary clinical interventions are needed.

The Holistic Student Assessment- Retrospective (HSA-R) is an end-of-the-year self-report which contains the same 61-items and 14 subscales designed to assess students' social-emotional development as the HSA. However, it asks respondents to report the extent to which they believe that their thoughts and feelings have changed since beginning the program.

Resiliencies

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

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

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

- Trust: Perception of other people as helpful and trustworthy.

- Empathy: Recognition of other's feelings and experiences.

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

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

Relationships

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

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

Learning and School Engagement

- Learning Interest: Desire to learn and acquire new knowledge.

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

- Perseverance: Persistence in work and problem solving despite obstacles.

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

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

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

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

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

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

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

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