Aspirations Incubator

YEAR 2 **EVALUATION REPORT**

aspirations incubator

Initiative is not an inborn trait but rather, develops within youths' daily lives as a result of strong and effective relationships with adults and peers, opportunities to explore interests and develop skills, and chances for autonomy and responsibility.

READY, WILLING, AND ABLE: A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Emanuel & Pauline A. Lerner Foundation's Aspirations Incubator is a six-year pilot initiative invested in strategic capacity building for seven youth development organizations in rural Maine communities and small cities. Grounded in the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, the Aspirations Incubator invests targeted resources to provide comprehensive mentoring-based programming to increase resiliency and introduce new opportunities to a cohort of young people starting in 7th grade and continuing through high school graduation. To document the potential impact and effectiveness of this unique, long-term mentoring model, the Lerner Foundation has contracted with the Data Innovation Project to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year implementation and outcomes evaluation. This report reflects the second year (September 2018 to August 2019) of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation and details emergent findings in program implementation and preliminary participant outcomes.

Methodology

This report summarizes information gathered from two semi-annual data reports (December 2018 and September 2019) submitted by grantee sites; 23 key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership (including a board member), and community stakeholders conducted in September and October 2019; data from a survey of Cohort 1 (8th graders) conducted between June and August 2019; 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 and lessons learned presented 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.

Key Findings

Program Implementation. Across the seven sites, 778 students were engaged in recruitment efforts and 103 were ultimately enrolled in Cohort 2. Students enrolled in both cohorts predominantly identified as white, although cohorts were more diverse than the state overall (84% and 77% white, compared with 94% in Maine); they were evenly split between boys and girls. All sites reported an easier time with recruitment and engagement, having incorporated what they learned from the previous year. They also had stronger relationships with local schools and the community. By the end of Year 2, Cohort 1 maintained an 80 percent retention rate (based on the initial group of students) and Cohort 2 maintained a 95 percent retention rate.

With the support and guidance of staff from the Lerner Foundation, Program Managers at each site worked within their unique communities to actualize the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles. Managing two cohorts simultaneously was both challenging and illuminating for sites, and they become more efficient and focused in their work. The sites experienced great success exposing students to new experiences and building informal relationships, but struggled to establish strong adult and peer mentoring networks. One site left the Aspirations Incubator program altogether in Year 2, and others experienced staff turnover, which prompted the Lerner Foundation to focus intensively on knowledge management (e.g., how an organization handles information and resources) during coaching sessions and all-site convenings.

Preliminary Student Outcomes (Cohorts 1 & 2). 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. From there, each student is identified as in need of a low (Tier 1), moderate (Tier 2) or high (Tier 3) level of support. At the outset of the second program year, 46 percent of Cohort 2 fell into Tier 1, 37 percent were in Tier 2, and 17 percent were in Tier 3, the highest level of need. Compared to Cohort 1 when they began the program, Cohort 2 had a greater proportion of students in Tier 1 (46% compared with 42%) and fewer in the higher-need tiers.

The Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self Change (HSA-RSC) was completed at the end of the year and asked students to reflect on their involvement with the program and report the extent to which the program influenced them positively or negatively on a number of criteria. Cohort 1 students were also asked to participate in a short supplemental

> *"The kids that are involved in the program, you can see their self-confidence has increased, they feel more comfortable speaking for themselves. The big thing is that they are learning how to take care of themselves, no matter what the issue is."*
>
> **SCHOOL PRINCIPAL**

student survey after the completion of their 8th grade year. Overall, 77 percent of 8th graders who completed the supplemental survey said they accept people who are different; but only half strongly agreed that they felt like they were part of something meaningful (53%) or had someone to talk to when they felt lonely (51%). In terms of postsecondary plans, 89 percent thought they would finish high school, 66 percent thought they would attend college and 82 percent thought they would have a career. While it was less clear on the survey questions the extent to which students thought they were learning new skills or behaviors as a result of the program, their qualitative responses showed clear benefits. Moreover, 95 percent of students who completed the HSA-RSC in Year 2 reported positive changes on three or more subscales of the HSA as a result of their participation in the program (93% in Cohort 1 and 98% in Cohort 2) and almost three-quarters reported improvements in their relationships with adults and peers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the second year, the Aspirations Incubator successfully enrolled and supported over 170 students across two cohorts. They continued to report on a wide range of unique and meaningful program activities through which participants had new experiences and built supportive relationships with peers and adults. With success also comes an opportunity for lessons learned. Specifically, the evaluation yielded some insights for the work going forward, offered here for consideration.

Strive for the next level of implementation on key principles

While sites are on track to fully implement most aspects of the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, four areas emerged from the evaluation of Year 2

where it may be beneficial to focus in the coming year:

- **Network of Caring Adults and Peer Mentors:** Sites continued to find it difficult to forge strong interest and commitment from adults and youth mentors. To deepen this critical aspect of the program, learning how do to foster these relationships should be a priority topic for group learning and coaching.
- **Creating a Community Support Network:** Most sites have been building their community support network in response to specific students' needs. Instead, they should reach out proactively, examine existing networks in new ways, and compile their local resources into an asset map.
- **Embracing Student Voice and Choice:** While the youth reported that they have been engaged in making decisions, programs need to transition into meaningful power sharing and using inclusive group decision-making processes.
- **Preparing Students for Success After High School:** Just over two-thirds of 8th grade students said they intended to go to college, and this was much more likely among girls. Sites should focus on developing more college and career activities within their core programming and consider how they can introduce them earlier (e.g., in the 8th grade year).

Continue supporting organizational shifts to support and sustain the program

In Year 3, the Lerner Foundation should continue to provide this support to Aspirations Incubator sites in both individual and group settings. One option to consider is creating a collaborative learning approach that engages in case review with Program Managers and their supervisors to promote routine group learning. This could focus on various topics where additional support is needed (e.g., mentoring, using the HSA to inform programming, youth engagement, etc.).

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 designed to build the capacity of a small number 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 increasing resiliency in young people and introducing students growing up in rural Maine communities and small cities to new opportunities that 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. For a complete list and map of Aspirations Incubator grantees see **Table 1** and Figure 1. Note that in Year 2, Kieve-Wavus Education withdrew from the Aspirations Incubator, bringing the total number of sites to seven. This is discussed in greater detail later in the report.

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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.

Old Town/Orono YMCA
Old Town

The Game Loft
Unity

UMaine 4-H Center
Bethel

The EdGE Program of Maine Seacoast Mission
Cherryfield

Kieve-Wavus Education
Nobleboro

Chewonki
Bath

Seeds of Independence
Brunswick

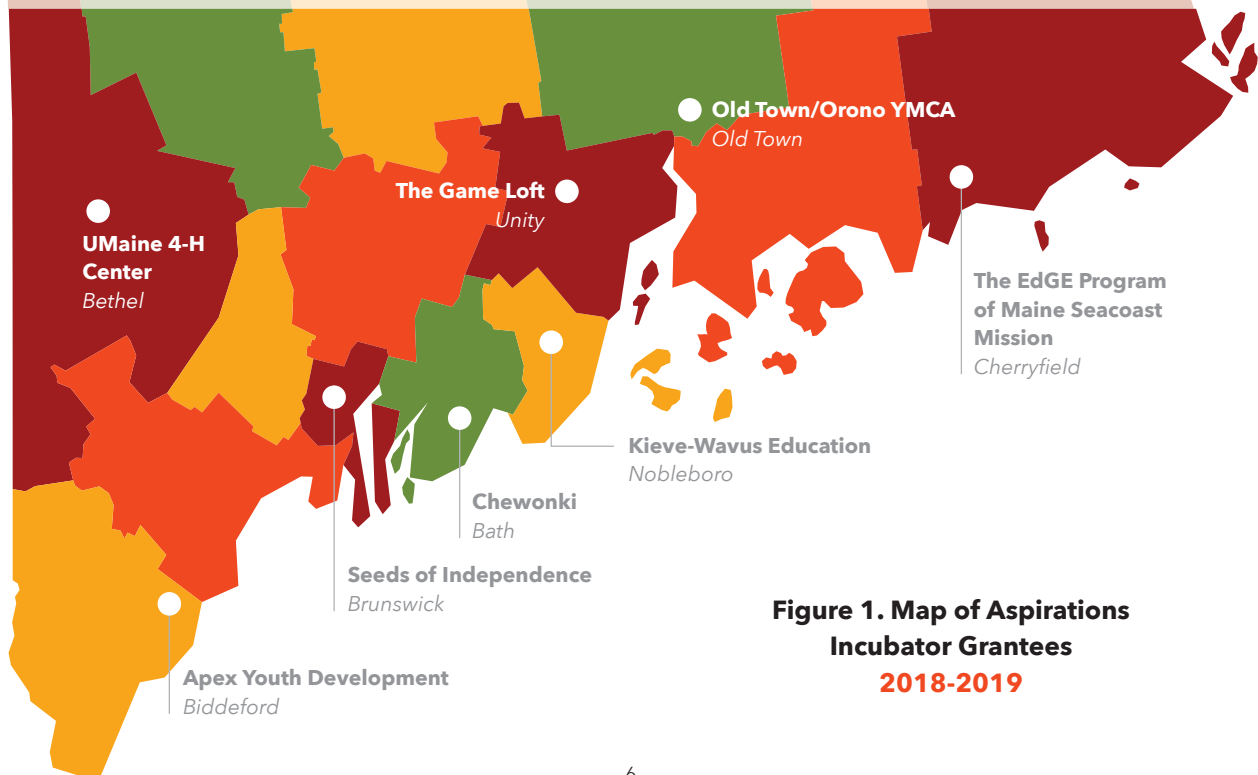**Apex Youth Development**
Biddeford

Figure 1. Map of Aspirations Incubator Grantees 2018-2019

Table 1. 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.
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. Apex offers free excursions and hands-on experiences for youth from 3rd to 12th grade, connecting them with mentors, their community and the great outdoors.	Biddeford School Department	Biddeford
Old Town-Orono YMCA	River Runners	The Old Town-Orono YMCA is a community centered organization that serves all ages by promoting healthy living, nurturing the potential of every individual and family, and fostering social responsibility.	RSU #34	Alton, Bradley and Old Town
Seeds of Independence[1]	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	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
UMaine 4-H Center	NorthStar	The UMaine 4-H Camp and Learning 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

1 Seeds of Independence withdrew from the Aspirations Incubator in September 2019 at the start of the third program year. However, they participated fully in Year 2, including data collection efforts, and are therefore included in this report. The interim evaluation report, to be released after the conclusion of Year 3, will contain a full discussion of site retention and lessons learned.

The Aspirations Incubator is guided by the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, which serve as the foundation for a successful youth development model developed by Trekkers, a 25-year-old youth-serving organization based in Rockland, Maine. The Trekkers model is evidence-based and has made a difference in the lives of hundreds of students growing up in the small fishing communities of midcoast Maine. Trekkers' Youth Programming Principles, listed below, are unique in their design because they focus on a continuous, long-term mentoring model that spans six years. The Lerner Foundation selected Trekkers to be the model program for the Aspirations Incubator initiative based on its solid record of students who have experienced a greater degree of positive outcomes when compared to their peers. The Trekkers approach to programming is also well supported by research literature on positive youth development.

Trekkers Youth Programming Principles

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

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 second annual report shares the significant themes that emerged from the second year of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot program (September 2018 to August 2019). The report reflects information gathered from the following sources: two semi-annual site reports;[1] 23 key informant interviews with Program Managers, organizational leadership (including a board member), and community stakeholders conducted in September and October 2019; exit interviews with representatives from Kieve-Wavus Education; data from a survey of Cohort 1 (8th graders) conducted between June and August 2019; and data from a self-report measure of social-emotional development for children and adolescents 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 and SPSS to produce basic descriptive statistics. More information on the data sources and the analysis methods can be found at the end of this report.

The data collected for this report reflect the second year of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation. The report further establishes the baseline for multi-year trends, and creates a benchmark against which future cohorts can be compared. This report does not explore differences observed among the sites or discuss fidelity to the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles; observed results should be considered preliminary. The first section of the report presents the findings related to program implementation. This is followed by a description of the participants and exploration of emerging participant outcomes.

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

Program Implementation

THIS SECTION DESCRIBES the second year of program implementation by detailing findings on three themes: recruitment, enrollment and retention processes; program delivery for Cohorts 1 and 2, organized by Principle; and how the host organizations have been adapting to support the model.

Recruitment and Enrollment

In practice, designing intentional program delivery systems for long-term engagement involves a six-year progression program model starting in the seventh grade and continuing through high school graduation. Program sites work with a cohort of 10-20 students at each grade level. Most sites began recruitment efforts for Cohort 2 in the fall of 2018, selected participants by December, and began programming by mid-January 2019. In total, sites reached out to approximately 778 students during recruitment and enrolled a total of 102 students (see next section for a profile of students). In addition, Cohort 1 maintained a cumulative retention rate of 80 percent, and varied by site.

After incorporating what they learned during the first year, all of the sites reported an easier time with recruitment and engagement in Year 2. Compared to the previous year, when some sites had difficulty

marketing an emerging program, they all reported that recruiting students was easier in Year 2, in large part because of the growing reputation of the programs in their communities. The sites' relationships with their regional school partners continued to develop, which aided program recruitment and enrollment. For example, some sites worked with teachers and guidance counselors to identify students for more targeted recruitment. Other programs sought ways to get "face time" with potential students by being present at the school during lunch time and breaks or by offering to chaperone field trips. Several Program Managers gave formal presentations about the program to students and some even had their Cohort 1 students design and deliver the presentations. Sites also employed a number of strategies to engage students and parents during the recruitment process outside of the schools, such as calling parents, inviting prospective students to attend volunteer activities or a program "preview" day, or by using more "kid-friendly" language in their program materials. Some sites even chose to start recruitment efforts with 6th graders; one Program Manager explained, "by starting to make connections with students in 6th grade, I have a longer runway to build trust."

Retention

Year 2 of program implementation showed greater fluctuation in enrollment than the previous year. Both cohorts, in aggregate, had students join mid-year, become partially active, or fully withdraw from the program, which can free up a spot for a new student to join. By the end of Year 2, Cohort 1 totaled 90 students and had an 80 percent retention rate; 100 were in the initial cohort, 13 new participants joined, and 23 withdrew. Retention varied by site as shown in **Table 2** below, ranging from 57 percent to 100 percent. In particular, Waypoint (at Chewonki) had only a 57 percent retention rate for Cohort 1 by the conclusion of Year 2. Although some students moved out of the community, a number who left indicated that they had too much going on and the program was not a priority for them.

For Cohort 2, a total of 102 students were enrolled in Year 2 and 98 students were considered active at the end of the program year; one new participant joined mid-year and five participants withdrew.

"It taught me how to be flexible with thinking and taking challenges head on while persevering through them even when they're difficult"

8TH GRADE STUDENT

Table 2. Program Flow at the End of Year 2, by Cohort and Site

	Initial Cohort	New	Withdrawn	Total at Year End	Retention
Cohort 1					
NorthStar	14	1	2	13	87%
Waypoint	20	3	10	13	57%
Trek2Connect	10	3	4	9	69%
Journey	15	0	1	14	93%
River Runners	17	5	2	20	91%
Roots	14	1	4	11	73%
I Know ME	10	0	0	10	100%
Total	**100**	**13**	**23**	**90**	**80%**
Cohort 2					
NorthStar	13	0	1	12	92%
Waypoint	20	0	2	18	90%
Trek2Connect	10	0	2	8	80%
Journey	17	0	0	17	100%
River Runners	18	1	0	19	100%
Roots	14	0	0	14	100%
I Know ME	10	0	0	10	100%
Total	**102**	**1**	**5**	**98**	**95%**

Program Delivery

The second year of program implementation offered the Aspirations Incubator sites their first significant opportunity to reflect, adjust, and iterate their program designs and delivery. As in Year 1, Aspirations Incubator programs were expected to complement and align with the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, but Year 2 provided the opportunity for sites to learn more about what is at the core of their individual program models and how different groups of students respond to their approach. The following section is structured around an investigation of how program delivery reflected select Youth Programming Principles in Year 2.

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

In the second year, sites continued to create pathways for adult and peer mentors in their programming, and to incorporate them into their cohort outings and excursions. In Year 2, they recruited 37 new adult volunteers and 12 new peer mentors, and they worked with 79 total adult volunteers and 14 total peer mentors. Mentors helped at a Relay for Life, a five day

island camping trip, a trip to an outdoor center and a wildlife refuge, and a variety of other outings. Many sites shared examples of how they were able to pull parents into more volunteer opportunities with their two cohorts. While this is not an example of fostering long-term adult mentors, Program Managers saw it as a way to both connect students to more caring adults and nurture deeper parent engagement with the program.

As with Year 1, sites struggled with this principle in varying degrees. Almost all continued to have better success recruiting mentors for short engagement periods than finding volunteers and mentors who were ready to make a long-term commitment. Some sites reported that their organizations had never worked with volunteers before and thus had to build new recruitment and on-boarding systems. Many have been challenged by simple logistics such as transportation; for example, 11 students and a Program Manager in a 12 passenger van leaves no room for two extra adults.

This year, sites discussed capacity challenges around managing volunteers. One site addressed this challenge by hiring a part-time volunteer manager.

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Others decided to be more selective about who they brought on as volunteers.

As observed in Year 1, sites experienced greater success recruiting adult mentors than peer mentors. Most sites lamented the specific challenges around recruiting peer mentors. Many cited how time consuming it is to build relationships with older students who are not in the program and how most schools don't have volunteer requirements for high school students to graduate. Some Program Managers said they were working with high school administrators to determine if it is possible to incentivize volunteerism among the high school students to facilitate better peer mentor recruitment.

▼ **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: 1) incorporates targeted, holistic youth development methods into the program to help young people find success and navigate challenges, and 2) 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 and aligns with a comprehensive approach to youth programming **(see sidebar)**. The assessment identifies strength and challenge areas for each student. Program Managers use assessment results 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). This year, 89 students in Cohort 1 and 89 students from Cohort 2 completed the HSA. Due to some changes in how the PEAR Institute has sites administer the HSA, Program Managers reported more challenges administering the tool this year than the last.

Program Managers offered some examples of how they used the HSA results to tailor one-on-one and group activities. One Program Manager explained, "One thing that I've done is that I take the data and it will help inform … when I ask kids to lead certain activities. One … is introverted but has a lot of trust within the group. So I will ask them to lead a game to build some of that voice and assertiveness." In terms

The PEAR Institute

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

Dr. Gil Noam, the Founder and Director of PEAR, has developed the Clover Model as a framework to help educators understand human developmental needs. It highlights four essential elements that people of all ages need 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 has developed the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) to be used in combination with the Clover Model (see Appendix D). 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 around providing a comprehensive approach to youth programming and using a validated assessment tool to gauge strengths and needs. For more information, visit **thepearinstitute.org**.

of group level activities, another Program Manager shared an example: "Our new cohort has issues with reflection and optimism and we have incorporated activities such as journaling and mindfulness into their program." Some Program Managers will also pair students based on how they score on various HSA scales, such as pairing a student who reported strong peer relationships with one who did not. However, only three sites spoke about developing Individual Growth Plans for students based on their HSA results and none spoke about using the HSA to inform how they allocated time for Informal Relationship Building. Overall, by the conclusion of Year 2, it appears that the HSA and Clover model have proved to be useful tools for the Aspirations Incubator sites as they structure their programming. They can and should grow their capacity in coming years by applying these tools to
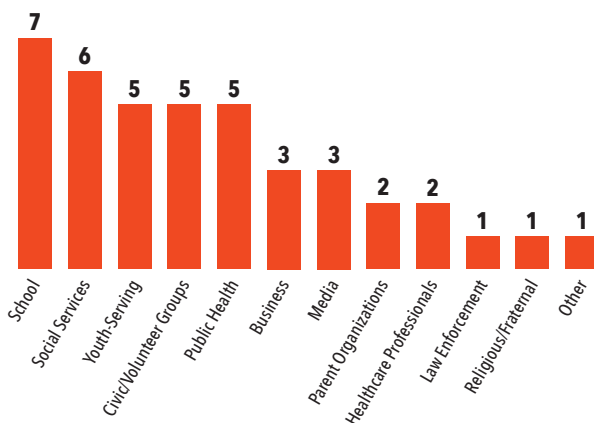
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their program planning to meet the unique needs of each cohort.

One potential barrier to deepening the use of the HSA is that Program Managers do not have supervisors or other colleagues within their organization who can provide feedback or guidance on using the HSA tools, as they are unique to the Aspirations Incubator program. To meet this need, the Lerner Foundation continued to provide intensive coaching and support to Program Managers around interpreting the HSA results, crafting individual plans and helping sites use the HSA results even more intentionally for the cohorts. Even with this targeted support, the current lack of knowledge and guidance to encourage more innovative uses of the HSA across sites has implications in two areas: first, if Aspirations Incubator programs intend to continue using the assessment tool in the longer-term they will need to build this type of knowledge and capacity (around how to use and interpret the tools) into their organizations. Otherwise, the assessment tools could become a burdensome data collection effort that is routine but not useful. Second, if sites are not using these tools to identify and address unique developmental needs for individual participants, the programs risk turning into a "once size fits all" model and thus result in less desirable outcomes.

needs of students (both academic and non-academic). In Year 2, most sites continued to strengthen their relationships with local schools. This was tied into the recruitment process, although some sites have had to re-build relationships due to leadership turnover at the local schools. In the semi-annual data report, sites also reported outreach to general community sectors like local social service providers, youth-serving organizations, civic and volunteer groups, public health organizations, and businesses **(Figure 2)**.

In Year 2, sites shared fewer instances of reaching out to their community support networks in direct response to a student's need, such as to help connect a student to counseling services. Instead, some sites shared ways in which they connected with people outside their program to proactively support their cohort, such as by regularly convening school staff and guidance counselors to discuss students' progress in the program. Others spoke of strengthening connections between their program and other services/programs offered through their parent organization. In spite of these examples, Year 2 continued to see limited evidence of Program Managers consistently building the community support network in advance of student interventions; that is, growing networks, connections, and resources for when they are needed, rather than in response to a specific student need.

▼ Principle 4: *Creating a Community Support Network*

To assemble support networks for young people, sites are asked to partner with parents, schools, health services, civic organizations, and other community partners to build high-level supports to meet the

Figure 2. Number of Sites Reporting Outreach to Community Partners, by Type

▼ Principle 5: *Prioritizing Informal Relationship Building*

Informal relationship building (IRB) centers on interacting with young people outside of regular scheduled programming, and maintaining those relationships even when core programs are not in session. Sites spent 1,988 total Informal Relationship Building contact hours with students in Year 2 (1,306 hours with Cohort 1 and 682 hours with Cohort 2).

While learning how to engage in IRB was challenging for many Program Managers in the first year, by the second they all reported great success. The idea of program staff meeting with participants outside of regular programming hours has become more familiar to all involved – the Program Managers, supervisors, community stakeholders (e.g., schools), and the participants themselves. In Year 2, Program Managers and other organization staff met with students to get hot chocolate, see a movie, go fishing, attend a convention together, go out for ice cream, and run to Target — just to name a few.

However, as Program Managers added a second cohort to their programs and anticipated adding a

third in the coming year, some expressed concerns about their capacity to continue engaging in IRB at such a high level. One Program Manager explained how IRB had been more challenging for them in Year 2: "I found getting to know the second cohort was harder. I don't know exactly why … The first year they were my only focus. Now attention is on the students I'm recruiting but also on the students coming up to me from my other cohort in the lunchroom. I have to implement more strategies for face time other than lunch."

▼ **Principle 6:** *Expanding Worldviews*

▼ **Principle 8:** *Encouraging Civic Responsibility*

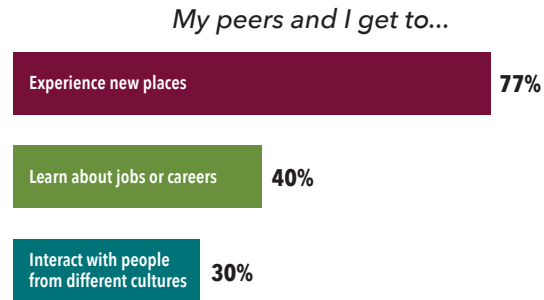▼ **Principle 9:** *Preparing for Success After High School*

The Trekkers 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. Every site reported holding at least one outdoor excursion, volunteering/service learning, career exploration, leadership development and team building, and sport or recreational activity with Cohort 1 and 2 in Year 2. On average, sites reported engaging students in about eight to nine different types of activities (depending on the cohort), and this ranged from five up to ten (out of 11 different activity categories). Some of the specific excursions and activities students

> *"Sure my time is spread a little more thin, definitely, so I haven't been able to connect with every student as much as I want. It doesn't feel like things are falling through the cracks but I wish I could hang out with individual kids more often."*
>
> **PROGRAM MANAGER**

Figure 3. Program Opportunities, Experiences and Learning

My peers and I get to...

Experience new places	**77%**
Learn about jobs or careers	**40%**
Interact with people from different cultures	**30%**

participated in this year include attending a whoopie pie festival, an outdoor retreat at the New England Outdoor Center, white water rafting, rock climbing, camping in Acadia National Park and on an island off the coast, ice fishing and a Relay for Life.

As a result of these activities, 77 percent of 8th graders said the program helped them to experience new places **(Figure 3)**; 40 percent said they have learned about jobs or careers they may want in the future. Indeed, 26 out of the 76 survey respondents wrote comments about how the program has allowed them to experience new things and what that has done for their worldview. One student shared, "It has definitely helped me experience things I wouldn't have normally been able to or would have thought to do before. It has helped me gotten to know different people and helped me get out of my shell. [sic]" Another said, "It's helped me understand different cultures better and get closer with my community."

Data illustrate some areas for growth in these principles in the coming years. For example, it is unclear the extent to which sites are engaging in activities to promote cultural diversity; only 30 percent of 8th grade students reported that the program provided them with the opportunity to interact with people from different cultures. In terms of civic engagement, all the Aspirations Incubator sites engaged in some aspect of service learning and community service, such as volunteering at food and agriculture festivals, participating in athletic fundraisers, and volunteering at nonprofits like homeless shelters and animal refuges. Others also learned how the political process works by visiting the Statehouse, and collecting signatures for a petition to help obtain a donation from the town. However, there is less evidence that the sites are actively promoting civil discourse within their groups. Finally, while there is some focus on career and college opportunities, this is an area that should grow in the coming year as Cohort 1 enters high school.

▼ **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 incorporate youth voice and choice into making decisions about meals, activities and excursions. For example, some cohorts are tasked with planning a whole day of activities, or shopping for and cooking a meal as a small group on a camping trip. However, Program Managers spoke less about how students were involved in setting group norms or if they were actively using consensus-based or other inclusive decision-making processes with their groups. Students reported similar experiences; 61 percent of 8th graders reported that they got to make decisions related to activities or meals, 56 percent said they determined some of the program rules and expectations, and only 32 percent indicated that have had the chance to

Figure 4. 8th Grade students' self-reported voice and choice in their programs

My peers and I get to...

Make decisions, like what activities we do or what food we eat	**61%**
Determine some program rules and expectations	**56%**
Lead some activities	**32%**

lead some activities **(Figure 4)**. It may be that more meaningful opportunities for student voice and choice will emerge as students get older and it becomes developmentally appropriate; indeed, some Program Managers observed that younger students wanted more structure. However, the extent to which all cohorts consistently experienced youth voice and choice, and the level of depth of that participation, remains an area to explore in future years.

Organizational Learning

One of the goals of the Aspirations Incubator is to learn what needs to be in place for programs implementing the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles to be successful. After a second year of implementation and managing two cohorts, site leadership and Program Managers shared many organizational observations, thoughts, concerns, and lessons learned. The second year also saw one pilot site leave the Aspirations Incubator. Kieve-Wavus Education experienced the departure of their Program Manager at the start of Year 2 **(see sidebar)**. This experience, as well as staffing and leadership changes within three of the seven remaining organizations (outside of direct Aspirations Incubator staff), influenced subsequent conversations and support from the Lerner Foundation around knowledge management, organizational capacity, and long-term financial and programmatic sustainability.

MANAGING CAPACITY AND BUILDING EFFICIENCIES

Organizational capacity was a consistent theme from the key informant interviews and semi-annual reports. These discussions largely stemmed from sites reflecting on the reality of juggling multiple cohorts at one time. Program Managers and leadership spoke about building efficiencies or streamlining program processes, structures, and curricula in order to effectively deliver their program to two groups. Some sites implemented technical solutions to improve program processes, such as better tracking systems. Other sites increased staff capacity by hiring more program staff or bringing on formal volunteers like AmeriCorps positions or volunteer coordinators. Sites also spoke about solidifying their program models and curricula year-to-year, which helps to make clear which elements are essential for students, and which pieces can be adapted as needed. One site reflected on the perspective having two cohorts brought to their program design: "It was tremendous. The cohorts are very different and that really enabled us to reflect more on how the program runs and how it is received by different kids and that we feel like we are going in the right direction because things we did with the first cohort are working with the second cohort even though they are very different groups of students."

Despite these efforts, sites still alluded to ongoing capacity challenges, especially as they look ahead to adding a third cohort in Year 3. Many organizational leaders are grappling with how to determine the reasonable capacity of the Program Managers as their caseloads increase. One site shared that they realize they are going to have to plan their program much farther out than originally anticipated: "We have

to plan ahead for the next three years. Do we need another Program Manager? Another vehicle? We don't know the answers yet but this will be the year that we will need to figure that out."

Others are considering how their model will have to adjust further as cohorts are added. For example, one Program Manager explained, "We want to maintain a weekly interaction with all our programs. But when there are only five [school] days a week there is an issue; whether that means we wean older students off the weekly meeting or run two cohorts in one day or onboard more staff. Our real challenge isn't this year but next year." The resounding sentiment from sites are that changes will need to be made, but the exact solutions to the anticipated capacity challenges have not yet been identified.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES

By the end of Year 2, almost every site had experienced internal staff turnover or the turnover of key external partners, such as a principal or superintendent at a school; one site underwent substantial staffing changes throughout the organization and needed to hire and onboard new staff quickly. Another site lost a key advocate at the school. Some sites weathered these transitions fairly well, but for others, the transitions led to a regression in their program's growth and establishment. These instances, in addition to the lessons learned from the departure of Kieve-Wavus, prompted the Lerner Foundation to focus intensely on knowledge management (how an organization handles information, data, and resources) during coaching sessions and all-site convenings in the second year. This technical assistance focused on topics such as how new staff are oriented to the Aspirations Incubator program, what other staff and/or supervisors in the organization need to know about the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, where information and resources are stored and shared, how information is communicated and with whom. The Lerner Foundation also developed tools and guidance for sites, including a "Knowledge Management Scorecard" focused on filing structures, data entry, database organization, and program documentation tailored to reflect key features of the Aspirations Incubator programs.

Many programs are still unique within their parent organizations, with Program Managers operating in relative isolation from other staff. Some organizations are trying to better integrate their Aspirations Incubator programs into the broader organizations. These integrations tend to happen in tandem with a deeper adoption of the Aspirations Incubator model

and principles into the broader mission and goals of the organization. For example, one organization is integrating the Aspirations Incubator program into a larger college readiness strategy and understands the aspirations focus to be a critical piece of this overall effort. On the other hand, while many organizational leadership staff and board members expressed their commitment to the Aspirations Incubator, few offered specific strategies around how they intend to institutionalize the Aspirations Incubator unique value going forward.

SUSTAINABILITY AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Understandably, discussions of sustainability emerged more frequently as programs will continue to expand in Year 3 and site leadership approach the point where hiring more staff and developing more funds becomes necessary for the program to continue. The discussion of knowledge management also intersects with aspects of sustainability, since successfully weathering or

preventing transitions appears to affect whether sites can continue participating in the Aspirations Incubator. In key informant interviews, most site leadership and board members were explicit and adamant about their commitment to continuing their Aspirations Incubator program after the Lerner Foundation funding ends. When asked about specific plans for sustaining the program, however, very few board members gave a clear response. Alternately, site leadership appear to have wrestled with questions of sustainability more intimately, and several spoke about how site leadership from some of the organizations have connected about pursuing shared funding. Leadership expressed concern about the reality that they have started to onboard students into the program whose participation will outlive the initial investment from the Lerner Foundation. They understand that the challenge they're currently facing is securing enough funding for five additional years of programming after the Foundation's investment ends, so that these new students will be able to finish the full program.

Program Attrition

Kieve-Wavus Education (KWE) left the Aspirations Incubator pilot program at the start of the second year. Leadership and program staff cited two primary factors leading up to this decision: staff turnover and differing philosophical approaches to youth development.

The Program Manager for the Kieve-Wavus Leads program left to pursue another opportunity at the start of Year 2, after a year of programming. The organization quickly realized that it did not have another staffer trained to implement the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles who could lead the program, and no one left on staff with the bandwidth to take over full time oversight of the Leads program.

After one year of participation in the Aspirations Incubator, organizational leadership of KWE also felt that their established infrastructure (including plans and curricula) and strong existing relationships with seven local schools set them apart from other sites. The organization was challenged by how to integrate the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles into their long-established model and organizational culture. For example, KWE seeks to impact a large number of local-area youth to have the skills to change school culture and climate. The Aspirations Incubator's model of going deep with a small group of youth on a more individual basis felt at odds with that approach. Program staff and leadership also found it challenging to decipher which elements of the Aspirations Incubator were prescriptive,

and where there was latitude to make the program their own. Moreover, it was unclear to program staff and leadership where the ultimate accountability lay if expectations or suggestions from the Lerner Foundation conflicted with the priorities of organizational leadership.

After considering the immediate staffing challenge of their Program Manager's departure and the longer-term prospect of continuing to invest in a unique and comprehensive program that differed from KWE's established approaches to youth development, Kieve-Wavus Education decided to withdraw from the Aspirations Incubator. The organization continues to support the students in the initial Leads cohort through their other program offerings.

Nonetheless, staff and leadership praised the Lerner Foundation for its support and expressed their appreciation that there are components of the Aspirations Incubator model that are not negotiable. They recommended that the Lerner Foundation be clear with sites about which program elements are required as prescriptive and where flexibility is acceptable, and that sites be prompted to think deeply about their core organizational philosophy and how it incorporates and responds to the Aspirations Incubator model. In addition, they suggested that the Aspirations Incubator model focus on fostering relationships across the whole organization (including the board and other leadership) to build trust and shared responsibility for the program, and that sites have a contingency plan in place from the outset in the event of staff turnover.

Participants & Preliminary Outcomes *(Cohorts 1 & 2)*

AS STATED PREVIOUSLY, this report compiles data collected after the second year of a six-year longitudinal program evaluation. In this early stage, the evaluation has focused on research questions about how the Aspirations Incubator initiative has been implemented across the sites. For Year 2, findings from the supplemental student survey of 8th graders in Cohort 2 as well as the Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self Change (HSA-RSC) point to emerging preliminary student outcomes. In some cases, findings around these social-emotional concepts were supported by the semi-annual reports and key informant interviews. In the coming program years, the evaluation team will implement additional data collection methods such as youth focus groups and site observations to continue to assess student outcomes related to participation in Aspirations Incubator programs. The following section describes the first and second cohorts of students and presents evidence of short-term gains observed after two years of program implementation.

Cohort 1 was more White (84%) at the outset than Cohort 2. For comparison, Maine's population is 94 percent White.

STUDENT STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) is comprised of 41 to 61 questions spanning 14 scales and grouped into three areas of life skills: Resilience, Relationships, and Learning and School Engagement. Students are asked to respond to each question on a scale, and their responses are averaged across all items in the subscale to determine whether the scale represents a strength, a challenge, or if it is considered "average"

Table 3. Initial Program Enrollment by Site, Cohort and Gender

Program	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
	Male	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**
NorthStar	43%	57%	31%	62%
Waypoint	60%	35%	50%	50%
Trek2Connect	40%	60%	60%	40%
I Know ME	100%	0%	60%	40%
Journey	27%	73%	35%	65%
River Runners	41%	59%	42%	58%
Roots	50%	50%	50%	50%
Total	**51%**	**48%**	**46%**	**53%**

Student Characteristics, Strengths, and Challenges at Enrollment

Aspirations Incubator sites enrolled 103 new students in Cohort 2 in Year 2. Cohort 2 had slightly more females than males (53% compared with 46%), although there was some variation by site **(Table 3)**. By comparison, Cohort 1 initially enrolled 116 students and was more evenly split between male and female, although one site enrolled only males, while another enrolled mostly females. Of those students in Cohort 2 who reported their race, the majority of students said they were White (77%), 9 percent reported being more than one race, and the remainder was split among African American, American Indian and Asian.

(that is, typical skill development for the child's age). The HSA also can also be administered with a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 2005), which assesses positive and negative aspects of behavior and indicates whether additional interventions are needed. Students are identified as in need of low (Tier 1), moderate (Tier 2), or high (Tier 3) levels of support depending on the number of strengths and challenges they exhibit. Students in Tier 1 exhibit primarily strengths and have few challenges, while students in Tier 3 have more challenges and are approaching (or in) crisis. According to PEAR, students who identify as needing Tier 3 supports may require specialized intervention.

This information is used by Program Managers to create an individual plan that tailors programming and interventions to meet students' unique needs.

At the outset of the second program year, 46 percent of Cohort 2 fell into Tier 1 and 37 percent were in Tier 2, as shown in **Figure 5**. Seventeen percent were in Tier 3, the highest level of need. Compared to Cohort 1 when they began the program, Cohort 2 had a greater proportion of students in Tier 1 (46% compared with 42%) and fewer in the higher-need tiers.

Across both cohorts, students participating during Year 2 presented a number of strength and challenge areas, averaging 3.3 strengths areas and 3.7 challenge areas across all sites (a few sites had more than four challenge areas on average). The most common student strengths were empathy, relationships (with peers or adults), and emotional control. The most common challenges were action orientation, relationships (peers and adults), perseverance, and reflection. By comparison, Cohort 1 presented 3.7 strengths and 3.0 challenges in Year 1.

Preliminary Outcomes

The Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self Change (HSA-RSC) contains 61 items that correspond to the HSA and is completed at the end of the year (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. At the conclusion of Year 2, 83 students in Cohort 1 (98% of those enrolled at the end of the year) and 87 students in Cohort 2 (94% enrolled at the end of the year) completed the HSA-RSC assessment. Cohort 1 students were also asked to participate in a short supplemental student survey after the completion of their 8th grade year. The survey contained 30 questions asking students about their experiences with the program, the extent to which the program has helped them learn skills (e.g., being in this program has helped me take with other people even when we disagree), and self-reported statements about their own behaviors (e.g., I try new things even when I'm not sure I will like them). Seventy-six students completed the 8th grade survey, for a response rate of 89 percent. A full copy of the questionnaire can be found in **Appendix A** of this report.

Overall, 77 percent of 8th graders who completed the supplemental survey said they accept people who are different but only half strongly agreed that they felt like they were part of something meaningful (53%) or had someone to talk to when they felt lonely (51%). In terms of longer term plans, 89 percent thought they

Figure 5. Cohorts 1 and 2 *at initiation by Tier*
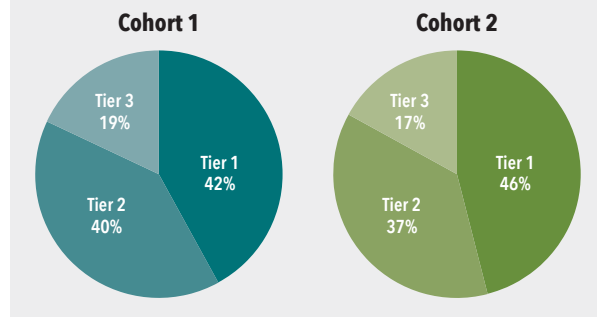
Cohort 1
- Tier 1 42%
- Tier 2 40%
- Tier 3 19%

Cohort 2
- Tier 1 46%
- Tier 2 37%
- Tier 3 17%

would finish high school, 66 percent thought they would attend college, and 82 percent thought they would have a career. While it was less clear on the survey questions the extent to which students thought they were learning new skills or behaviors as a result of the program, their qualitative responses showed clear benefits. Moreover, 95 percent of students who completed the HSA-RSC in Year 2 reported positive changes on three or more subscales of the HSA as a result of their participation in the program (93% in Cohort 1 and 98% in Cohort 2) and almost three-quarters reported improvements in their relationships with adults and peers.

SENSE OF BELONGING AND POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Despite the challenges noted by some sites with informal relationship building and recruiting adult volunteers, the majority of students in both cohorts reported improvements in their peer and adult relationships according to the HSA-RSC, as seen in **Figure 6**. At the conclusion of the second year, 43 percent of 8th grade students (those in Cohort 1) strongly agreed that being in the program had helped them to feel connected to their community, and 53 percent strongly agreed that they felt like

Figure 6. Measures of Relationships

Percent Reporting Positive Change, by Cohort

Legend: ADULT | PEER

- Cohort 1: Adult 63%, Peer 74%
- Cohort 2: Adult 69%, Peer 73%
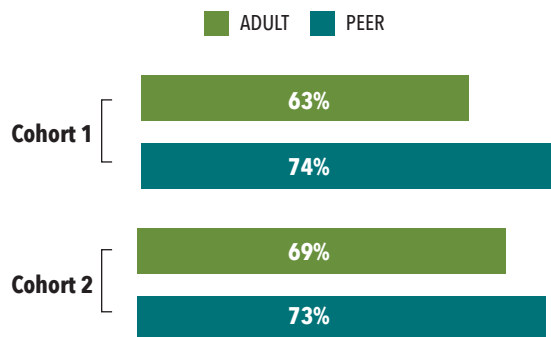
they belonged to something meaningful. Similarly, 51 percent said that when they feel lonely they have several people to talk to. One student wrote, "It has made me think about I can't just be the only one." Another said, "Everyone who is in it are all very helpful and kind, they are someone to go to for help." Another said simply, "I have more friends." However, only 37 percent said they feel like they matter to the people in their community.

The Program Managers also offered similar observations. One Program Manager reflected on how close students in their cohort had become: "Our cohorts really bonded with each other through the overnights. This year we have seen cross friendships to develop and are now going out of their way to express kindness to other kids in their cohort." An adult mentor spoke about how one student who was shy and emotionally closed off has now started seeking their support at school, where the adult is a guidance counselor. The adult mentor even shared how the student's mother had also noticed a change since the program began; that "she is usually a girl of few words, but she came in here and was really able to emote."

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND RESILIENCE

Although there was some variation by cohort, almost all students reported positive change in the area of Action Orientation (engagement in physical and hands-on activities), Empathy (recognition of other's

Figure 7. Measures of Resilience

Percent Reporting Positive Change, by Cohort

Cohort 1: 84%, 79%, 74%, 71%, 63%, 63%, 62%, 54%

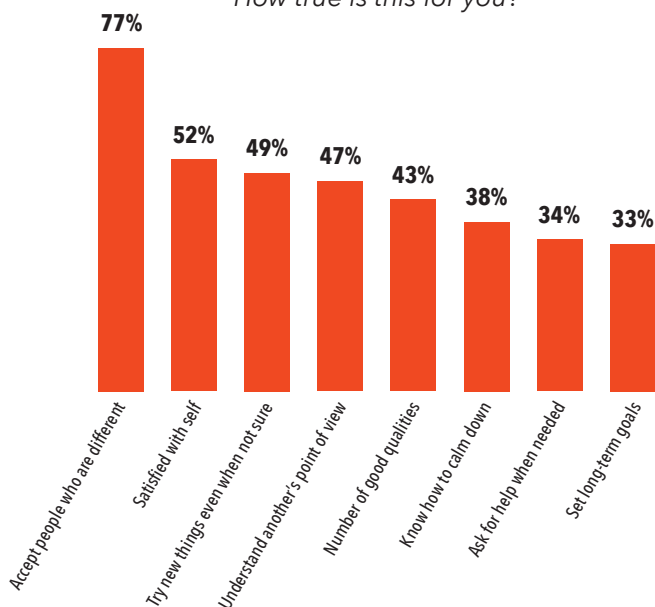Cohort 2: 83%, 80%, 70%, 69%, 67%, 57%, 55%, 51%
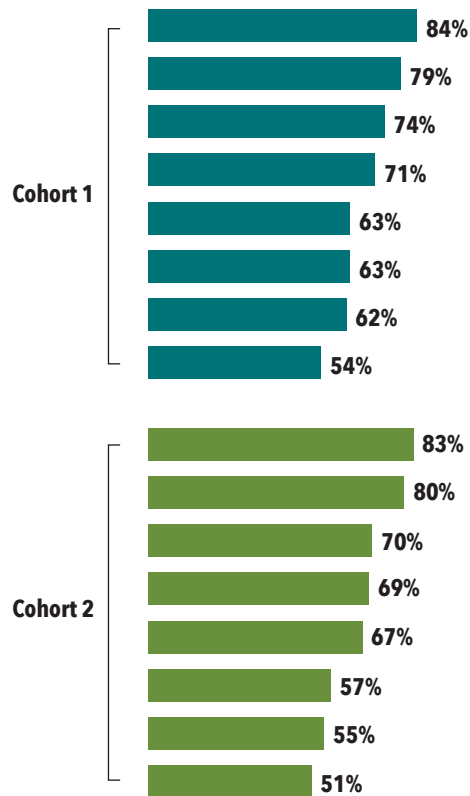
feelings and experiences), Assertiveness (confidence in putting oneself forward, advancing personal beliefs, wishes or thoughts and in standing up for what one believes) and Perseverance (persistence in work and problem solving despite obstacles). **Figure 7** shows the full range of positive growth on measures related to resilience. There were few differences by gender, although girls were slightly more likely to report growth in terms of Empathy (56% compared to 44% for boys).

Interestingly, students' perceptions of themselves on the student survey showed a somewhat different assessment of their skills and behaviors **(Figure 8)**. When asked how much certain characteristics sounded like them, 77 percent reported that they accept people who are different, and 47 percent said they try to understand another person's point of view. Similarly, 49 percent said they try new things, even when they are not sure they will like them. However, only a third said they set long-term goals (33%), ask for help when needed (34%), or know how to calm down when they get upset (38%). Nonetheless, students had many things to say about how the program has helped them learn about themselves. Many wrote about talking

Figure 8. Self-Reported Skills

Percent Responding "Sort of or Very True"
How true is this for you?

Category	Percent
Accept people who are different	77%
Satisfied with self	52%
Try new things even when not sure	49%
Understand another's point of view	47%
Number of good qualities	43%
Know how to calm down	38%
Ask for help when needed	34%
Set long-term goals	33%

with others, and how the program has helped. For example, "It makes me deal with people who don't like me and vice versa," and "It has showed me not to go and yell at people when I get mad." Others shared how the program has increased their confidence and being more outgoing. One student shared, "I have learned many valuable life skills, like how to give a speech publicly without looking confused or nervous." Another wrote, "It has made me more confident when I am giving input." Many others wrote about their increased willingness to take chances.

LEARNING, SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND ASPIRATIONS

The two cohorts showed similar patterns in terms of growth on measures related to learning and school engagement **(Figure 9)**. As reported on the HSA-RSC, students reported the most positive growth in terms of Learning Interest (desire to learn and acquire new knowledge), followed by Critical Thinking (examination of information, exploration of ideas, and independent thought) and Academic Motivation (incentive to succeed in school). There were some differences by gender, with girls being somewhat more likely to report growth in terms of Academic Motivation (57% compared to 43% for boys) and School Bonding (55% compared to 45% for boys).

The survey of 8th graders showed that 89 percent of students in Cohort 1 intend to finish high school

Figure 9. Measures of Learning and School Engagement
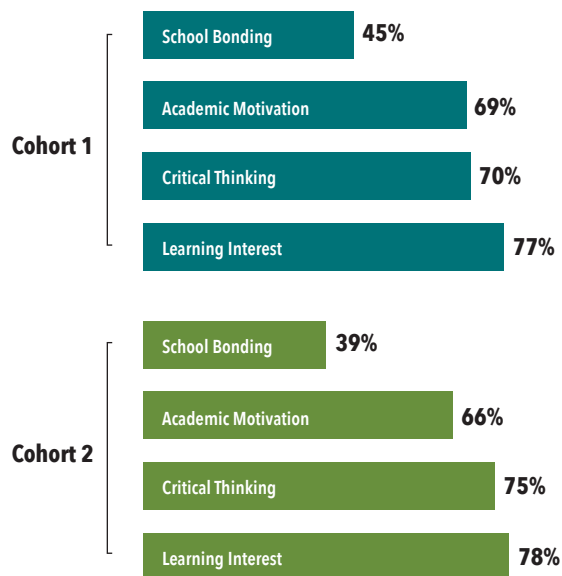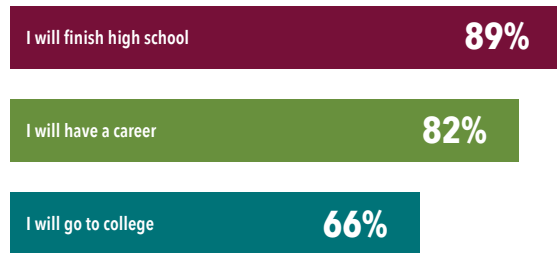
Percent Reporting Positive Change, by Cohort

Cohort 1
- School Bonding: 45%
- Academic Motivation: 69%
- Critical Thinking: 70%
- Learning Interest: 77%

Cohort 2
- School Bonding: 39%
- Academic Motivation: 66%
- Critical Thinking: 75%
- Learning Interest: 78%

Figure 10. Measures of Aspiration

Percent Reporting Sort of or Very True

- I will finish high school: **89%**
- I will have a career: **82%**
- I will go to college: **66%**

and 82 percent said they would have a career (see **Figure 10**). However, only 66 percent said they would go to college. It is worth noting that these rates of intention to complete high school and attend college align closely to the statewide rates of high school graduation and college initiation for Maine (87% in 2018-19 and 61% in 2016, respectively). Although the numbers are rather small, girls in Cohort 1 were more likely than boys to report they intended to go to college (73% compared with 54%). Nonetheless, many students wrote about how the program was helping them aspire to something more. For example, one wrote, "It has affected me major like it made me want to go to college and do something good for myself." Another wrote, "It has allowed me [to] understand what I want to do with my life and how to be successful with my goals in life." Key informants also provided examples of students taking more initiative to connect with teachers and advocate for themselves around their academic needs.

Conclusion & Recommendations

I N THE SECOND year, Aspirations Incubator programs successfully enrolled and supported over 170 students across two cohorts. They continued to report on a wide range of unique and meaningful program activities through which participants had new experiences and built supportive relationships with peers and adults. Program Managers forged new or stronger partnerships with schools, often becoming a valued presence, and reached out to many community partners to help build their programs. Program Managers also created individual plans for working 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 second year, the majority of students in both cohorts were reporting positive growth in more than one area.

In 2019-20, sites will continue to refine the core components of their programs as they add another cohort and new program staff. They will tweak how they administer assessments, and, more importantly, become even more adept at how they use them. And, they will continue to work on ways to expand their peer and adult volunteer bases and community circles. Specifically, the evaluation yielded some insights for the work going forward, offered here for consideration.

it difficult to forge strong interest and commitment from adults and youth mentors. To deepen this critical aspect of the program, sites need to learn more about what they can do to foster these relationships, from recruitment onward; this should be a priority for group learning and coaching support in Year 3.

Creating a Community Support Network: As observed in the previous year, most sites have been building their community support network in response to specific students' needs as they arise rather than proactively connecting with support providers and networks (or relying on guidance counselors). This could entail reaching out to organizations in the community to share information about the program

Strive for the next level of implementation on key principles

While sites are on track to fully implement most aspects of the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, four areas for renewed focus emerged from the Year 2 evaluation:

Network of Caring Adults and Peer Mentors: Despite making strong progress to develop a mentor network, sites continued to have challenges in Year 2. In some cases, the challenges were logistical (e.g., transportation) but in most other cases, sites found

and to learn more about the organization's processes and philosophies. It could also mean looking at existing networks (such as the board, volunteers, other staff, and parents) to see what sorts of connections, skills or resources they have to offer. Sites may benefit from compiling lists of resources (or accessing existing lists) to develop a local "asset map," and from developing a communication strategy for making local organizations and key individuals aware of the program, its needs, and its progress.

Embracing Student Voice and Choice: While students

reported that they have been engaged in making decisions about meals, trips, and some program expectations, it is not clear how deeply programs have involved youth in important decision making and meaningful power sharing. Few are using inclusive group-based decision-making within their groups to promote youth voice and civil discourse. This should be an area of emphasis for programs in Year 3, especially for the older cohorts (8th and 9th grade) where it is developmentally appropriate.

Preparing Students for Success After High School: While the majority of 8th grade students discussed expanded worldviews and being exposed to new ideas and experiences, the proportion of students who intend to go to college remained on par with the state (just over 60%), and girls were much more likely to aspire to postsecondary college than boys. Waiting until later years (e.g., 10th or 11th grade) to develop this aspect of program potentially misses an opportunity to influence aspirations at a critical point for students as they enter high school. In Year 3, the sites should focus on developing more college and career activities within their core programming, and consider how they can introduce them earlier (e.g., in the 8th grade year).

Continue supporting organizational shifts to support and sustain the program.

In Year 2, the Lerner Foundation focused on helping Aspirations Incubator sites identify who holds responsibility for maintaining fidelity to the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles and think critically about how to share that knowledge with other (and future) staff. In Year 3, the Lerner Foundation should continue to provide this support to Aspirations Incubator sites in both individual and group settings. One option to consider is creating a collaborative learning approach that includes a case review with Program Managers and their supervisors to promote

routine group learning. In this case review, a site presents a particular scenario, the coach provides feedback (both positive and constructive), and then the entire group engages in open discussion and problem-solving. This approach allows group members to benefit from shared learning and modeling of coaching techniques for the whole group. The sessions could focus on topics where additional support is needed (e.g., mentoring, using the HSA to inform programming, or youth engagement).

Looking Ahead

This annual report shares the significant themes that emerged from the second year of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot programs (September 2018 to August 2019), focusing primarily on the extent to which programs operated as intended and any lessons learned around implementation. At the conclusion of Year 3, the Aspirations Incubator sites will be halfway through the six-year timeline; the interim report, to be released in spring of 2021, will take a more comprehensive look at the previous three years and engage in more complex analyses. It will also present new information, specifically attendance and achievement data from partner schools, and

insights from site visits and focus groups with youth from three of the Aspirations Incubator programs in the form of case studies. As the programs grow and serve more participants, the evaluation 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.

"It has helped me learn to make new friends in different ways, I have learned many valuable life skills, like how to give a speech publicly without looking confused or nervous. This program is amazing and I plan on sticking with it until the end."

8ᵀᴴ GRADE STUDENT

Appendix A: Methods & 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 second annual report, three data sources were used: 23 key informant interviews with Program Managers, organizational leadership, and community stakeholders; two Aspirations Incubator semi-annual site reports (December 2018 and September 2019); and information data from the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) and Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self Change (HSA-RSC). 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-RSC 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. In 2019, the reporting periods were shifted from December–May and June–November to September–February and March– August to better align with the program year. This change happened midway through the 2018-2019 program year, which resulted one reporting period longer than most: December 2018–September 2019. The reports are collected through the SurveyMonkey.com platform and Excel Workbooks and PDF files are extracted for analysis. Descriptive statistics are conducted in 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-RSC data on behalf of the Aspirations Incubator sites and to produce site specific and aggregate data files. This involves providing a secure, online 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 Aspirations Incubator responses to the larger pool of HSA/HSA-RSC responses. Per the agreement, the Evaluation Team has access to these processed MS Excel files for each site as well as the aggregate results; these processed data files were used by the Evaluation Team to conduct additional analysis and visualizations for this report.

Student Survey

A student survey was designed and administered to learn about 8th grade students' experiences in their Aspirations Incubator program and the extent to which these programs are achieving some of the Aspirations Incubator's hoped-for short-term outcomes around exposure to new experiences and cultures, increased aspirations, and student

voice and choice. The survey tool was administered electronically via the SurveyMonkey platform and in paper form. Passive consent forms were sent to parents at least three weeks before the survey was given to students. Program Managers administered the survey to their students over the course of the summer 2019. The University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board approved all survey consents and protocols. A copy of the 8th grade survey tool is shared below.

8th Grade Student Experience Survey

We are doing a survey to find out about students' experiences in the **[INSERT PROGRAM NAME]** program. Two researchers from the University of Southern Maine are in charge of collecting this information.

If you agree to take the survey, it will ask you questions about your experiences with the program, your relationships with others, your support networks, what new experiences you have had since joining **[INSERT PROGRAM NAME]**, and how you might see yourself in the future.

Your answers to this survey will be kept confidential. That means that your answers will not be shared with anyone except for the two people conducting this survey. They will not share your answers with anyone else. When the survey results are reported, your answers will be combined with the answers of other students in the program.

You can ask **[INSERT PROGRAM NAME]** questions about this survey at any time. If you decide at any point not to finish the survey, you can stop. There is no penalty for not doing the survey or not answering all the questions.

The benefit to you in taking this survey is that your feedback might help the **[INSERT PROGRAM NAME]** improve their program and better support you.

If you check yes below, it means that you have read this and that you want to take the survey. If you don't want to take the survey, check no. You will sign this agreement by entering your initials and the month and day of your birth and clicking "Complete this Assent."

❏ **YES**   ❏ **NO**   **Your initials: _____**
Date: _____

PLEASE INDICATE HOW MUCH YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ABOUT YOUR PROGRAM. "PEOPLE" CAN INCLUDE THE PROGRAM MANAGER, PEERS, MENTORS AND VOLUNTEERS.
[Anchors: disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, very much agree]

At my program, my peers and I get to...
- make decisions, like what activities we do or what food we eat.
- lead some activities.

- determine some of the program rules and expectations (for example, how many times we have to attend the program).
- learn about jobs or careers that I may want to have when I am older.
- interact with people from different cultures.
- experience new places.

The people in my program...
- treat me with respect.
- give me good advice.

Being in this program has helped me...
- learn how to stay level-headed in stressful situations.
- talk with other people even when we disagree.
- understand my strengths and how to use them.
- learn how to express my needs.
- learn how to make concrete plans and carry them out.
- feel connected to my community.
- feel like I belong to something meaningful.

THIS QUESTION IS MADE UP OF A LIST OF STATEMENTS. FOR EACH STATEMENT, PLEASE TELL US HOW TRUE IT IS FOR YOU.
[Anchors: not at all true for me, not really true for me, sort of true for me, very true for me]
- I set long-term goals to achieve what I think is important.
- I try new things even when I'm not sure I will like them.
- I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
- On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
- In a disagreement, I try to understand the other person's point of view.
- I know how to calm down when I get upset.
- I ask for help when I need it.
- I accept people who are different from me.
- When I feel lonely, there are several people I can talk to.
- I feel like I matter to the people in my community.
- I will finish high school.
- I will go to college.
- I will have a career.
  Thinking back on all the different experiences you have had at the program, how has the program affected you?
  Do you have anything else to add about this program?

Appendix B: Holistic Student Assessment Details

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

RESILIENCIES

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

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

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

Trust: Perception of other people as helpful and trustworthy.

Empathy: Recognition of other's feelings and experiences.

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

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

RELATIONSHIPS

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

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

LEARNING AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Learning Interest: Desire to learn and acquire new knowledge.

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

Perseverance: Persistence in work and problem solving despite obstacles.

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

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

More information can be found at: **pearinstitute.org**

Appendix C: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

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

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

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

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

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

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

More information can be found at: **sdqinfo.org**

"They know that I am going to hear them and listen. I try to show up to a lot of things. We create a space that feels safe, where we can push the boundaries a little bit."

PROGRAM MANAGER

Appendix D: The Clover Model of Youth Development

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

- **The Active Engagement leaf** represents body, impulse, and movement. Active Engagement is about connecting to the world physically. All young people have growing bodies, and everyone needs to live in and use their bodies.
- **The Assertiveness leaf** represents voice, choice, and executive function. It is about self-control, negotiating rules, roles, and boundaries, making decisions for oneself and having the capacity to act. All humans feel the need to affect and influence the world around them.
- **The Belonging leaf** describes the need for friendship, empathy, and support. This leaf is about strong, positive relationships with peers and adults, mentorship and group acceptance and identity. Humans live in a society, and belonging to a society is important to all people.
- **The Reflection leaf** describes the need for thought, analysis, insight, observation, and understanding.

The Clover Model of Youth Development
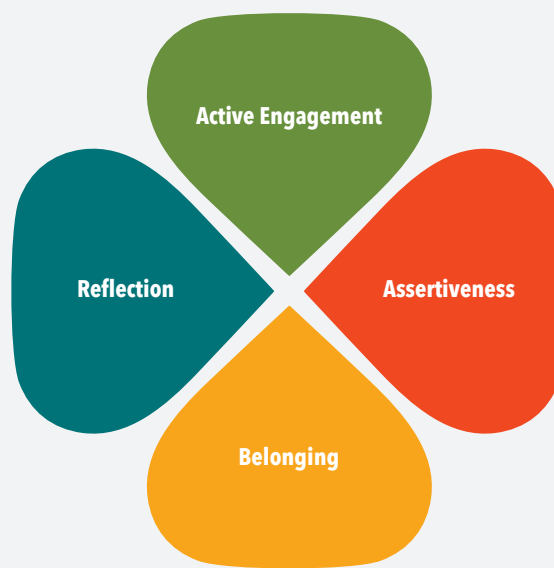
This leaf is about giving self-discovery and meaning-making. It involves making sense of one's own experiences, emotions and thoughts to create a sense of identity. Humans are conscious creatures; many philosophers have argued that the ability to reflect is what makes humans unique.

The model is about balance between the four leaves. While many individuals tend to specialize in a specific leaf, we each possess all the leaves to a greater or lesser degree and our tendencies may shift over our lifetimes. People specialized in one leaf often demonstrate particular strengths and struggles. Striving for personal balance between the four leaves of the Clover can help adults and students achieve positive mental health.

Clover is helpful in identifying the basic needs that kids have. By designing programs accordingly so each one of these gets nourished and children can work towards their own personal Clover balance, children are healthier mentally, emotionally, and academically.

aspirations
incubator

info@aspirationsincubator.org

aspirationsincubator.org