



21st Century School Leadership Academy External Evaluation Brief, 2020–2021

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OVERVIEW

The 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) was established by Senate Bill 75 in 2019 as part of the statewide System of Support (SOS). The purpose of 21CSLA is to provide high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for school and district leaders in California. The initiative comprises a 21CSLA State Center run by the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Education and seven Regional Academies (RAs).



The purpose of RTI International’s external evaluation is to determine areas of 21CSLA impact, ways that 21CSLA can scale or replicate, and how 21CSLA is centralizing equity in professional learning.

During the 2020–2021 school year, 21CSLA participants engaged in professional learning opportunities mainly in the second half of the year. The primary opportunities consisted of coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning.

- **Coaching** is individualized support provided by 21CSLA staff built on relational trust and focused on equity-centered challenges and continuous improvement. The participation requirement was a minimum of 25 hours. The estimated total participants for 2020-2021 was 280.¹
- **Communities of practice** are small cohorts of leaders in similar district roles facilitated by 21CSLA staff and focused leadership for equity, continuous improvement, and distance or digital learning. The participation requirement was a minimum of 12 hours. The estimated total participants for 2020-2021 was over 630.¹
- **Localized professional learning** is additional learning that complements and is aligned to offerings developed by 21CSLA and informed by regional needs and local input. The participation requirement was 12 hours. The estimated total participants for 2020-2021 was nearly 700.¹

Four evaluation questions (EQ) guided the evaluation for 2020–2021:

EQ1: What is the impact of 21CSLA on leadership practices that affect student learning?

EQ2: To what extent is 21CSLA centralizing equity for the purposes of increasing equitable student outcomes?

EQ3: To what extent does 21CSLA scale and replicate effective leadership professional learning?

EQ4: How does the 21CSLA Initiative positively impact the statewide System of Support?

Data for all four questions were collected from focus groups of professional learning participants ($N^2 = 14$), RA Leads ($N = 17$), and 21CSLA leadership ($N = 14$); surveys completed by participants in all three professional learning activities ($N = 730$) and state and lead agencies participating in the statewide SOS ($N = 88$); and program documents. Findings are described on the following pages.

¹ Total participant numbers were reported by the 21CSLA Center. Numbers are estimates and may include duplicates.

² N represents the total number of individual people, also called the sample size, within the focus groups or surveys.

21CSLA IMPACT ON LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

EQ1: What is the impact of 21CSLA on leadership practices that affect student learning?

Subquestions guiding data collection are as follows:

- What are changes in leader knowledge, skills, and mindsets?
- What are changes in leader practices or actions?
- What is the impact of leader changes on school or students?

The purpose of this question is to explore and describe practices of leaders involved with 21CSLA and associated student outcomes to determine potential impact. The expectation is that over the full 21CSLA grant period, leaders at multiple system levels (school, district) involved in 21CSLA will demonstrate changes in knowledge, skills, and mindsets and that leaders will report how school and students are affected by these changes.

Impact on Knowledge or Awareness and Skills or Practice

Participants built knowledge and skills in **equity-focused leadership, continuous improvement processes, such as improvement science, and reopening schools**. Participants in coaching noted particular growth in coach-led reflections to support change processes at their schools.

Participants planned and started to make changes in the practice of using **inquiry or continuous improvement processes** at their school or district to address an equity-focused problem of practice (e.g., using inquiry cycles, conducting a root cause analysis), **supporting equitable instruction for all students or specific populations** (e.g., English Learners, special education students), and/or **developing plans or next steps to address inequities at their school site**.

Assistant Principal: “[Coaching] has given me the confidence to frame the content of what we are working on as a staff/admin team by stating the ‘why’ for how our actions can create more equitable outcomes for students. I was jumping into action without framing over past years and assuming staff saw the connections.”

Select Survey Findings

- The majority of community of practice and localized professional learning participants (84%; $N = 422$) reported that they are implementing new practices because of their participation in 21CSLA.
- Eighty-one percent of coaching participants ($N = 105$) reported that 21CSLA coaching increased their understanding of engaging in systems thinking to address equity-related issues, and 75% of coaching respondents ($N = 100$) agreed or strongly agreed that coaching improved their ability to lead with an equity-centered focus.

Impact on Staff or Students

Participants in 21CSLA have or will impact other staff at their school or district site by **shifting teaching practices or establishing new practices** to support students’ academic and social-emotional learning.

Participants reported anticipating impact on schools and students in the **areas of school climate and culture and student learning** (e.g., English Learner redesignation, math achievement).

Teacher Leader: “Participating in these workshops has led me to feel more confident about leading discussions around equity. As a result, the team attending these workshops has led and facilitated staff equity-minded workshops at our own site. The hope is that we can create a pedagogical change at our campus that will uplift and work towards promoting educational equity for our students.”

21CSLA CENTRALIZATION OF EQUITY

EQ2: To what extent is 21CSLA centralizing equity for the purposes of increasing equitable student outcomes?

Subquestions guiding data collection are as follows:

- How is 21CSLA centralizing equity within knowledge, skills, mindsets, and practices for multiple levels of the system (e.g., school and district)?
- How does 21CSLA's focus on equity enhance the SOS focus on equity?
- How does 21CSLA scale equity-centered practices?

The purpose of this question is to explore and describe activities focused on equity to determine potential equitable student outcomes. The practices of 21CSLA are expected to have equity structures (e.g., provide opportunity or access for leaders of color), equity content (e.g., asset-based practices), and approaches for improving outcomes for systemically marginalized and historically underserved students and adults. It is also expected that 21CSLA will focus on building knowledge, which is the first necessary step in changing mindsets and practices.

Findings show each of these elements. RA participants talked about how equity was central to their work during the 2020–2021 school year. Many RAs focused their offerings on **increasing knowledge and skills** around equity and what it might look like in individual contexts. Some RAs were actively focused on changing **mindsets and practices**. RAs shared that building participants' capacity to effect change in their local contexts (e.g., new ways of looking at data) will help with scaling long-term, equity-centered practices. Participants reported that, while initially hesitant that they could affect change due to resistance from other administrators, they found that they could influence changes within their immediate network.

Centralizing Equity in Adult Learning and RA Structure

- RAs prioritized being responsive to the needs of their participants, especially given the needs that arose due to the pandemic. RAs created safe spaces for leaders to talk about issues of equity, which varied depending on the region (e.g., professional learning for rural and remote areas, an African American Male Leader Network focused on well-being).
- At least two RAs highlighted challenges in recruiting leaders and coaches of color and were strategizing about how to address that in the coming year.

Centralizing Equity Within Knowledge

- The majority of RAs focused on **building their participants' knowledge around equity** through their offerings and did so in a number of ways, including the following:
 - Building knowledge around local problems of practice (e.g., math equity and social-emotional support)
 - Building expertise by having participants share their work in supporting marginalized and minoritized students
 - Offering anti-bias trainings
 - Building knowledge through book studies like ways to integrate equity into all levels of leadership in year two

Regional Academy Lead: "One of the biggest things that ... impacted people is [having them] conduct the empathy interview. It opened a lot of eyes. It really supported leaders, empowering their colleagues and other teachers to teach with a culturally relevant lens and to lead with relationships first, which in this pandemic has been what students ultimately need."

Centralizing Equity Within Skills and Practices

- For those RAs who could focus on skills in year one, the **most impactful exercise** was the **empathy interview**, as participants observed significant changes in the way they thought about students (see textbox).

Centralizing Equity Within Mindsets

- RAs underscored their goal of **shifting equity mindsets** in participants but understood this would require continued commitment and conversation.
- A small group of RAs talked about supporting **moving away from a deficit- to an asset-based mindset**, especially when looking at data.

21CSLA REPLICABILITY OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

EQ3: To what extent does 21CSLA scale and replicate effective leadership professional learning?

Subquestions guiding data collection are as follows:

- What 21CSLA Center and Regional Academy practices are aligned with leadership professional learning research and best practices?
- How have 21CSLA Center and Regional Academy partners created a coherent set of policies and activities?

The purpose of this question is to explore and describe effective professional learning practices to inform scale and replicability of 21CSLA. Practices are expected to align with literature related to California's Quality Professional Learning Standards and related systems improvement research, and a coherent set of practices will reflect the standards.

Participants reported that their experiences aligned with many features of effective professional learning. Facilitators and coaches provided active learning opportunities in which leaders focused on refining their day-to-day leadership practice, such as collaborating on a shared problem of practice or reflecting on aspects of their practice with their coach. RA offerings were tailored by focusing learning on need-related problems of practice or by grouping participants in role-alike groups according to similar school contexts. Many participants appreciated the time to collaborate, network, and jointly address practical challenges with colleagues from their own schools and across their region.

Teacher Leader: "This experience has been so eye-opening and life changing."

Participants' Feedback on Professional Learning Experiences

- A majority of respondents participating in communities of practice or localized professional learning sessions reported they had opportunities to discuss (94%, $N = 424$) and practice (81%, $N = 423$) what they learned with colleagues "most of the time" or "always."
- Collaboration and coaching provided advice, collegial feedback, opportunities to reflect, and/or new strategies to test in school contexts. Ninety-eight ($N = 101$) percent of coaching participants reported that their coach asked questions that expanded their thinking.

The communities of practice role-alike groups from similar school contexts (e.g., rural or similar student demographics) provided networking by role and/or school context that were not available at participants' district.

- Almost all (92%) coaching participants reported that the coaching sessions were useful to their practice and the amount of time with their coach was enough time to grow their practice (91%, $N = 106$). More than half of participants met with their coach for at least 11 sessions, if not more.
- Almost all participants indicated that professional learning facilitators and coaches were knowledgeable of the content needed to guide learning (99%, $N = 424$ of communities of practice and localized professional learning participants; 96%, $N = 103$ of coaching participants).

Principal: "Participating in 21CLSA provided time for our district team to process and discuss our issues of disproportionality. We were able to collaborate with and learn from neighboring districts working on similar issues. This work has impacted our ability to evaluate the numerous needs in our district and our plans to support students, families, and staff in moving forward."

Overall, participants found that their experience in 21CSLA was an effective use of their time (94%, $N = 422$ of community of practice and localized professional learning participants; 98%, $N = 104$ of coaching participants).

21CSLA IMPACT ON THE STATEWIDE SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

EQ4: How does the 21CSLA Initiative positively impact the statewide System of Support (SOS)?

Subquestions guiding data collection are as follows:

- How do 21CSLA partners, including the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, California Department of Education, and Center and Regional Academies, work together to develop and sustain a functioning statewide SOS?
- What influence does 21CSLA have in the field beyond 21CSLA cohorts?

The purpose of this question is to explore and describe practices of 21CSLA Center and Regional Academies and the connections and influences occurring within the SOS. It is expected that 21CSLA partners will collaborate, communicate, and integrate in particular ways that will contribute to the functioning of the SOS and that 21CSLA will influence the field beyond the boundaries of the involved regions and participants as the grant progresses.

The 2020–2021 school year marked the 1st year of implementation, which overlapped with planning, for all seven RAs. Many of them reported that there was very little planning time, and many were “building the plane while they were flying it.” As such, several participants anticipated that they would make more progress towards fully integrating the 21CSLA Initiative with the SOS in the coming year. In general, RAs reported collaborating with their Geographic Lead Agencies³ by establishing collaborative advisory groups or sharing data and/or resources focused on similar student outcomes.

SOS Participants’ Awareness and Contact With 21CSLA

- All Geo Lead survey respondents reported awareness of the 21CSLA Initiative, and 71% ($N = 21$) indicated that they have had contact with the 21CSLA Initiative.
- There was a growing awareness between Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) Lead Agencies⁴ and RAs. In January of 2021, SELPA Lead respondents reported no contact with the 21CSLA Initiative. Slightly over half (54%) of SELPA Leads reported that they were not aware of the 21CSLA Initiative, and 46% were aware of it but had not yet had any contact with it ($N = 13$).

How 21CSLA and SOS Partners Work Together

- The 21CSLA Center presented at statewide SOS All Leads meetings, invited two Leads as webinar guest presenters, added representatives from the SOS to the 21CSLA Advisory Council, and joined the Data Culture Task Force with Geo Leads and SELPA Leads to build a culture of effective data use for equitable student outcomes across the system.

- At least four of the seven RAs talked about how they had been **partnering with their Geo Leads as part of the 21CSLA work**. The ways in which they collaborated varied, but those who had established partnerships were positive about the increased benefits for their regions. For example, one RA described how sharing goals with Geo Leads for outcomes for 21CSLA led to developing a joint advisory group that meets quarterly. One RA cited challenges in finding ways to collaborate with the Geo Leads and met some resistance in sharing data and resources.
- RAs conducted needs assessments that included engagement with Geo Leads to seek input on the professional learning needs of leaders.
- During focus groups in June 2021, **RAs still reported having fewer connections to SELPAs**, although at least two mentioned having preliminary meetings or developing relationships with their SELPA Leads. One RA related having met for the first time with the SELPA Lead a week prior to the interview to discuss how the Leads could be “brought into the co-design, possibly co-offer, co-facilitate [a new whole child support series].”

Regional Academy Representative: “[Collaboration] to me has been really powerful. [We] have had a number of meetings with people on the SOS team and then subsequent meetings unit-to-unit about how we can collaborate in Year 2 in 21CSLA [and] how can we support schools and school districts in leadership development. [There are] a lot of exciting things happening just specifically to SOS [and our roles in 21CSLA].”

³ As part of the statewide SOS, Geographic Leads build the capacity of other County Offices of Education in their area, coordinating and providing Differentiated Assistance.

⁴ As part of the statewide SOS, SELPA Leads work as capacity builders, connectors, and facilitators to ensure that the integrated educational system meets the needs of all learners, including students with disabilities.