



Community Engagement Initiative Year 2 Findings External Evaluation Brief, 2020–2021

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Introduction

California's Statewide System of Support is designed to provide assistance to school districts to meet the needs of students they serve, with the focus on building capacity to sustain improvement and address disparities. The Community Engagement Initiative (CEI) as part of the Statewide System of Support is to provide technical assistance and build capacity of county offices of education and local education agencies in community engagement. The CEI is facilitated in partnership by the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools, California Association for Bilingual Education, and Families In Schools. RTI International is the external evaluator of CEI.

The state established CEI to (a) build capacity in communities and districts to have difficult conversations with each other and build trust, with a focus on improving outcomes for pupils; (b) identify effective models of community engagement and metrics to evaluate those models; (c) develop effective peer-to-peer partnerships between school districts and county offices of education; and (d) scale up the work identified in by CEI to improve community engagement statewide and incorporate practices that prove effective towards continuous improvement efforts. These efforts are supported through a peer leading and learning network (PLLN) in which cohorts of district teams meet to identify, share, and learn effective practices to improve community engagement. In this report, we provide evidence for goals (a) - (c).

In the first year of the CEI, six districts that comprised Cohort I met virtually and in-person throughout the 2019-2020 school year. In its 2nd year of implementation, 12 new districts joined the initiative as Cohort II and five of the Cohort I districts continued to participate. Because of COVID-19 pandemic, the CEI pivoted its efforts. The CEI leads launched a shorter engagement than the previous year for Cohort II due to challenges districts faced in meeting the needs of their students and families. Cohort II only met during Spring 2021. Cohort I continued to participate and supported the facilitation of Cohort II but not to the extent originally planned. Instead of meeting in person, the CEI leads facilitated every PLLN meeting through a virtual format.

The purpose of the CEI evaluation in Year 2 was to continue to understand and provide feedback on the effectiveness of the network and understand the extent to which the CEI is making progress towards their goals. The evaluation focused on these research questions:

1. To what extent did participation in the year-long cohort deepen district teams' knowledge, skills, and mindsets? (Goal A, Finding 1)
2. To what extent are districts and county offices of education implementing the identified best practices or common characteristics of effective community engagement during and after participation in the cohort? To what extent are districts engaging in continuous improvement? (Goals A and B, Finding 1)
3. How effectively has CEI virtually built the capacity of school district and county offices across the state to improve community engagement? (Goal A, Finding 2)
4. To what extent are PLLN participants developing effective peer-to-peer partnerships between school districts and county offices of education that support the deepening community engagement practices? (Goal C, Finding 3)
5. How and to what extent are the PLLN facilitators collaborating with one another and CEI leads to provide meaningful learning opportunities for PLLN participants? To what extent are PLLN facilitators equipped to support the network and its related activities? (Goal C, Finding 4)

Data Collection: RTI collected feedback from district team participants, including parents; students; community members; teachers; and district, school, and county office of education leaders through interviews and surveys. Twenty-three participants from Cohort I and 66 participants from Cohort II responded to the RTI survey, for response rates of 41% and 40%, respectively. RTI conducted interviews and focus groups with 26 members from Cohort I in May and June 2021, for a 46% response rate. Bilingual data collection strategies were used to meet participants' language preferences. These data sources are supplemented by data from the post-PLLN surveys administered by the CEI leads.

Building Capacity in Communities and Districts to Implement Best Practices

FINDING 1: DISTRICTS ARE LEARNING AND IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES WITH DISTRICT LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

One of the goals of the CEI is to increase capacity of communities and districts to engage in authentic community engagement. RTI examined the extent to which individuals Cohorts I and II deepened their individual knowledge and skills related to effective community engagement practices and whether districts implemented new practices due to participation in the PLLN.

Cohort I Learning and Implementation

The five Cohort I districts focused their year 2 work on identifying and addressing a district problem of practice. Cohort I participants learned aspects of improvement science to address their problem of practice, including understanding the purpose of selecting a problem of practice and how to use the tools to address it. **Eighty-two percent** of Cohort I participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “As a result of participating in the PLLN, I feel more confident applying improvement science practices to addressing our problem of practice.”

“These problems of practice brought more, like, deeper points than all we have been talking about family engagement and involvement... Like how we talk about assumptions and judgments and all of that, but those problem of practice meetings have brought much more digging deeper into the real issues... They’re real or authentic opinions and thoughts around the school, education.”

— Cohort I Family and Community Engagement staff



Four of the five districts identified how their problem of practice was directly related to one or more of the six root causes of ineffective engagement, such as lack of understanding of what constitutes highly effective engagement and lack of inclusivity around race and culture. To address these root causes districts employed multiple strategies. For example, four districts’ problems of practice focused on **creating connections with families** that have historically weak ties with school and district staff. Two districts focused on **listening to and learning from families** to build trust and understand their needs. Three districts focused on **engaging African American families**, noting the need to build cultural consciousness and responsiveness to work with groups that have been historically excluded.



Districts recognized many successes due to their work on their problem of practice, such as **challenging their assumptions** about parents’ perspectives and experiences, giving them the ability to **serve a large number of families**, despite being virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic and **interacting with families they have not interacted with before**. Two districts mentioned that **without CEI, they would not have addressed this specific challenge at their district**.



District team members mentioned some areas of learning to further improve their district’s community engagement practices, including **coaching** to refine implemented of their selected strategies and continued learning **from the Cohort I district peers**.



All Cohort I districts mentioned that their district leadership provided support for their work, which is also evidenced by the **incorporation of three of the districts’ problem of practice strategies in their Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) plan**.

“I think that being part of this group, the CEI, definitely helped us with that focus. It was something that we knew was there, but we didn’t know how to come about it. It really allowed for us to come together and really try it out.”

— Cohort I school staff member

Building Capacity in Communities and Districts to Implement Best Practices



To understand the impact of their strategies and inform future work, districts are or will use both quantitative and qualitative data, such as parent surveys.



Challenges with implementing strategies to address their problem of practice included parent recruitment, difficulties creating relationships through Zoom, lack of awareness or buy-in among school or district staff regarding effective community engagement practices, collecting the right data to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, and the need for additional staff to implement its community engagement activities on site.

“I have learned so much from other school districts ‘best practices’ for engaging parents/students from all backgrounds. Some practices I see fit to improve our engagement locally at multiple districts.”

—Cohort II Community partner

Cohort II Learning and Implementation

Cohort II spent their 1st year learning about the root causes of ineffective community engagement and identifying districts’ community engagement strengths and challenges. At least 80% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they met these learning outcomes as reported in the January and March post-PLLN surveys

“This has been a positive experience for us to self-reflect and look at where we are on the journey of connecting and engaging parents. It’s been a good thing to learn from districts that are a year or two ahead of us.”

—Cohort II District Leader



Most Cohort II participants reported that they learned new community engagement practices from the district presentations that would enhance their current practices. However, less than half of participants implemented the new practices learned during this school year. Other participants reported that they hope to implement them in the future.



Three-quarters of Cohort II participants believed that their district has the necessary support and resources to implement the effective strategies.

Building Capacity in Communities and Districts to Implement Best Practices



FINDING 2: DISTRICTS CAN STRENGTHEN DATA CAPACITY AND REFLECTION TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A goal of the CEI is to increase the capacity of districts to improve community engagement practices. Because this is only year 2 of the initiative, whether CEI has helped districts improve their capacity yet is not being assessed. In addition, community engagement practices might have been disrupted or put on pause because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, RTI focused on understanding existing capacity to identify areas for growth.



Over 75% of Cohort I participants believed that their district has the right data to assess the effectiveness of their community engagement strategies and a process for improving their practices, while only half of Cohort II participants believed so.



Just about half of Cohort I and II participants found the LEA self-assessment tool useful for improving community engagement practices, and 20% of Cohort II participants were not aware of the tool.



Most Cohort I participants believed that their district has inclusive stakeholder LCAP processes that valued parent feedback, while three-quarters of Cohort II participants believed so.

Developing Effective Peer-to-Peer Relationships



FINDING 3: CEI FACILITATORS WERE EFFECTIVE FACILITATORS OF THE PLLN MEETINGS

CEI's model for professional learning focused on facilitating discussions and sharing best practices through the creation of district networks. Effective facilitators are needed to ensure sharing and learning occur. As part of the scaling of the network model, Cohort I district team participants facilitated some of the Cohort II meeting activities, with the lead agencies playing the main facilitation role. In 2021-2022 Cohort I facilitators will assume a larger facilitation role with CEI lead agencies playing a supportive role.

 Most participants from Cohort I and II perceived the CEI lead agencies and Cohort I facilitators as effective. Successful aspects of the meeting mentioned by Cohort II participants included the ability to connect with others, the organization of the meeting, and the *conocimiento* (getting to know you) activities. In terms of what could improve participants mentioned wanting more time to collaborate and learn from one another, as well as improving interpretation for monolingual participants.

"Facilitators really utilized technology and communication tools well. Overall, a positive experience for sure." —Cohort II Community member



While most participants reported that they understand the goals of CEI and what their team should accomplish this year, a small subset of participants reported some confusion.



Cohort I facilitators reported feeling prepared to facilitate the network meetings for Cohort II, while a few mentioned needing more lead time. The CEI leads' collaborative practices, such as cycles of planning meetings, were helpful.

Developing Effective Peer-to-Peer Relationships



FINDING 4: FACILITATORS BUILT A TRUSTING COMMUNITY WHERE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEER DISTRICTS WERE CREATED

A goal of the CEI is to build relationships across districts to surface best practices and innovative solutions to make positive differences for students. RTI examined the extent to which participants created trusting relationships between within their district teams enable learning and implement change.



Trusting PLLN community: The CEI facilitators were effective in creating a trusting community in which most participants felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, comfortable contributing to the discussions in their team, and valued by their team members.



Within district collaboration: All Cohort I participants thought their district team had the skills necessary to collaborate. Most Cohort II participants believed that their district team had the skills and trust to collaborate effectively, as well.



Between district collaboration: Approximately half of Cohort I and II participants created or maintained their relationships with other district team members. A little more than half of Cohort II and over three-quarters of Cohort I participants believed that role-alike groupings during the PLLN were effective in building relationships with other district team members.

“I can say, as a parent, yes. I think I feel like we were included in everything with the problem of practice... We were asked to be honest, to dig and to really put out there what we thought was missing, and I think that we felt heard, and we also felt like we had a voice in the process.”

—Cohort I Parent

Slight differences were noted between Cohort I and Cohort II participants; a larger percentage of Cohort II participants were less sure about their comfort and relationships with other PLLN participants. Differences between Cohort I and Cohort II participants make sense. Cohort I is in its second year of the CEI and district teams were able to build relationships last year with four in-person meetings, whereas Cohort II’s engagement in the CEI was limited to three virtual meetings. Cohort II participants noted challenges with building relationships through Zoom and that technical challenges with interpretation prevented full participation from monolingual Spanish-speaking participants.