



# Community Engagement Initiative Year 3 Findings

## External Evaluation Brief, 2021-2022

Prepared under contract to  
California Collaborative for Educational Excellence

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November 2022

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# INTRODUCTION

California's Statewide System of Support assists school districts in meeting the needs of students they serve, with the focus on building capacity to sustain improvement and address disparities. The California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) leads the Community Engagement Initiative (CEI) as part of the Statewide System of Support to provide technical assistance and build capacity of county offices of education and local education agencies in community engagement. The state also engaged a consortium of three entities—one county office of education (San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools) and two community-based organizations with expertise in community engagement (California Association for Bilingual Education and Families in Schools)—as lead agency partners. RTI International is the external evaluator of CEI.



The Legislature created CEI in 2018, pursuant to Section 140 of Assembly Bill 1808. According to statute, the purpose of CEI is 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 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) led by CCEE and the three lead agency partners, in which cohorts of district teams meet to identify, share, and learn effective practices to improve community engagement. Each district team consists of parent leaders; community partners; teachers; Family and Community Engagement (FACE) staff, and district, school, and county office of education leaders. Some district teams also include students.

CEI is in its 3rd year of implementation and continued to adjust to challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Five Cohort I districts, that began their work in 2019–2022, and 12 Cohort II districts, that began their work in 2020–2021, continued to convene for PLLN meetings this past school year. Plans for in-person gatherings in early Winter and Spring 2022 were altered due to continued surges in COVID-19 cases. CEI leads and Cohort I members facilitated PLLN meetings through a virtual format.

The purpose of the CEI evaluation in Year 3 is to continue to understand and provide feedback on the effectiveness of PLLN. The evaluation focuses on the following research questions:

1. To what extent did participation in the year-long cohort deepen district teams' knowledge, skills, and mindsets? (Goal A of the statute)
2. To what extent are districts and county offices of education implementing 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 of the statute)
3. How effectively has CEI virtually built the capacity of school district and county offices of education across the state to improve community engagement? (Goal A of the statute)
4. To what extent are PLLN participants developing effective peer-to-peer partnerships between school districts and county offices of education that support deepening community engagement practices? (Goal C of the statute)
5. How and to what extent are 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 of the statute)



# Data Collection

RTI collected feedback from district team participants through interviews and an end-of-year survey. Thirty-two of 58 (55%) Cohort I participants and 68 of 163 (42%) Cohort II participants responded to the survey. RTI conducted focus groups with 24 members of Cohort I and 24 members of Cohort II. Bilingual data collection strategies were used to accommodate participants' language preferences.



## Building Capacity in Communities and Districts to Implement Best Practices.

### Finding 1: Districts are implementing new community engagement strategies and practices and aligning their work with their Local Control and Accountability Plan priorities

One goal of CEI is to increase capacity of communities and districts to engage in authentic community engagement. Each district is working on identifying and addressing a district problem of practice related to its community engagement practices. RTI examined whether 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 CEI.

#### Improvements in knowledge, skills, and mindsets



Cohort I and II interviewees reported learning about **effective practices for family and community engagement** by participating in CEI. Learning about other districts' practices expanded their understanding of different strategies.



**Participants are developing a growth or continuous improvement mindset and knowledge of improvement science tools.** Eighty-eight percent of Cohort I ( $N = 32$ ) and II ( $N = 64$ ) survey respondents said that as a result of participating in CEI, they are more likely to address challenges in their district's community engagement practices.

Interviewees explained that hearing other districts share how they address community engagement challenges motivated them to address their own district's challenges. A majority of Cohort II ( $N = 60$ ) respondents felt confident applying improvement science tools to address their problem of practice.



**Cohort I and II parent leaders** reported a better understanding of their district's community engagement work as a result of participating in CEI. This experience also made them recognize the importance of their leadership in other venues and has spurred one parent leader's involvement in more initiatives.

*Cohort II district leader: "I actually really appreciate being able to hear all of the best practices. I think the sharing of best practices for authentic engagement is a huge lesson that I am learning here. And I appreciated that everyone shared not just the things that are working well, but that they became, they also exposed their vulnerable points so that, I think, it made us all realize that we are on the same boat. And we are not going to be able to solve everything, but we're looking at things. What are the things that we can solve? So that was a huge piece for me, having all of these other districts that I can go to. That networking is incredibly helpful."*

### Implementation of new practices to build district capacity



Cohort I districts reported implementing **numerous strategies to build capacity and authentic relationships** with communities and families that benefit student success. These districts have seen meaningful changes, mainly in the areas of **Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) tools and processes to gather input, leadership programs for families, and strategies to improve capacity** such as hiring more staff and implementing professional development. Cohort I districts are also **connecting with families** they have not traditionally connected with. The strategies implemented were either part of these districts' problem of practice work or additional strategies implemented by their district.



Cohort II districts started the journey to address their problem of practice and have started to see some changes in their district's practices. Most districts focused on improving authentic **two-way communication with families** by changing their communication or outreach systems or **improving how they engage families from nondominant backgrounds**. For example, one district hired a translator and additional community assistants to communicate with families while another district piloted a parent communication app at two school sites and hopes to expand implementation to another site.

*Cohort I FACE staff: "I feel like it was the very first [CEI] meeting and one of the high school districts,... they had high school students there and they were talking about getting to the LCAP meetings. And I remember us looking at each other like, 'Oh my gosh, you have to be high school to do this!' And now [in our district we include]... our elementary and middle school kids. It's phenomenal what their voice has contributed, not just to the LCAP, but anything we ask them.... And that came directly out of that aha moment [at the first CEI meeting]."*

*Cohort II school leader: "I think it forced us, in a positive way, to really get down to specifics and really talk about what do we mean when we say X, Y, or Z. Instead of just saying we want families to be engaged, what does engagement look like? What practices are we using to move toward that? Defining what communication looks like with families, just some of those pieces that we talk about in vague terms. It really gave us the opportunity to sit down and come to some common agreements with different groups that are across our district."*

### Alignment of practices with districts' LCAPs



Many Cohort I and II districts **incorporated their problem of practice work as part of their LCAP**, and/or their existing LCAP efforts are already aligned with their problem of practice in various priority areas. Some Cohort II districts allocate funds within the LCAP to ensure they have the staffing and resources to implement their strategies.

*Cohort II district leader: "So for our LCAP, we were very intentional in the sense that one of our sections of our problem of practice was to make sure that we were very purposeful in our engagement of our African American families. And so since then, we have hired a parent engagement specialist. We have increased the number of services offered specifically geared towards engaging our African American families.... We increased the funding specifically for that, but also, we're doing more activities that we had not done in the past."*

**Finding 2: Districts articulated how their work will improve parent empowerment, sense of belonging, and trust. Two districts tied their work directly to student outcomes.**

### Changes in outcomes related to community engagement efforts



Most Cohort I and II districts hoped to see improvements in **parent leadership and/or empowerment and parent sense of belonging and connectedness** due to their problem of practice work but had not yet collected data that demonstrate changes in these outcomes. They hope to collect qualitative and quantitative data in the coming years, especially as they improve their data systems to track parent participation.



Districts articulated how their work on their problem of practice will **build trust between families or communities and schools**. Participants explained that setting up **authentic, active listening opportunities** for parents and school and district staff to communicate on an ongoing basis would develop trust. In addition, participants suggested that when **districts demonstrate to parents how their feedback is used or that changes are being made**, this will help build trust with families because it will show parents that their input is valued. Some Cohort I districts have started to incorporate parent feedback, while other districts hope to in the future.





More than half (**60%**,  $N = 30$ ) of Cohort I survey respondents were certain that practices they implemented because of participation in CEI is impacting student outcomes, while others were unsure or disagreed. Cohort I survey respondents believed that community engagement practices to **include more stakeholders in decision-making, especially students and parents, would better meet students' social and academic needs and therefore improve outcomes**. Respondents also believed that **they are building a safe and caring school community which establishes a foundation for student learning**. One Cohort I district and one Cohort II district mentioned how their efforts will make a direct impact on student outcome measures. The Cohort II district currently tracks improvements in these measures.

*Cohort I FACE staff: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. So if we're not listening, people will not feel like we care. If they don't feel like we care, they're not going to trust us. And there's some level of expected trust there because their children are coming to our school district. So we have a responsibility to make sure that, not only are we taking care of their students, but we're at least taking the time to listen to what their needs are."*



## Effective Facilitation to Develop Peer-to-Peer Relationships

**Finding 3: CEI facilitators created a culture in which participants felt safe sharing their challenges. Participants noted the importance of including voices of students and parents or guardians in CEI and reported challenges with ensuring full participation.**

CEI's model for professional learning focuses on facilitating learning and sharing best practices through the creation of district networks. Effective facilitators are needed to ensure sharing and learning occur. Participants must feel comfortable opening up and sharing their challenges, and facilitators should ensure equity of voice so that all participants contribute to discussions.



More than **80%** of Cohort I ( $N = 31$ ) and II ( $N = 68$ ) survey respondents reported that CEI facilitators **were effective in creating a culture in which district team members felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and questions**. Cohort II interviewees shared how they appreciated that facilitators created a safe space to share their challenges without feeling judged. Cohort I and II interviewees believed they were not alone in their journey to authentically engage families and they shared many of the same challenges and strengths as other districts. By learning about these challenges and strengths, they developed a sense of community with CEI participants, and it increased their motivation to continue to improve.



More than **80%** of Cohort I ( $N = 31$ ) and II ( $N = 68$ ) survey respondents **reported that parents and community partners were given opportunities in PLLN** to share their perspectives. However, Cohort II parents reported the need for additional support for parents to equitably participate, such as an orientation to onboard parents and students. Both Cohort I and II respondents also





believed that the inclusion of student input in CEI could improve. No Cohort I district teams and only four Cohort II district teams had students participate. Interviewees recognized the importance of having diverse voices and perspectives at the table, but survey respondents and interviewees acknowledged the difficulty with achieving equity of voice with parents and students.



Most survey respondents perceived that their district team collaborated effectively to create or implement the problem of practice. Most respondents believed that their district team had the skills to collaborate (Cohort I, **90%**; Cohort II, **86%**) and that the collaboration time during PLLN meetings was effective (Cohort I, **90%**; Cohort II, **82%**).

*Cohort II district leader: "I think from our parent, we did hear back and we did have a meeting, a session after the problem of practice, kind of discussed how things were going. And for her, I think she mentioned the same thing, that she wishes it was a little bit more practical, information that was being shared. She did say that some parts of it, she was a little lost and not understanding exactly what we were doing."*

#### **Finding 4: Cohort I and II districts are developing peer-to-peer relationships with one another, and these relationships can expand and deepen.**

A goal of 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 built relationships between district teams to enable learning and implement change.



Half of Cohort I and II survey respondents reported interacting with other districts to seek advice or input on their community engagement strategies or connecting outside of PLLN meetings. Participants reported that lack of time during meetings and the virtual setting were barriers to forging or maintaining relationships with other districts. Participants hoped to continue to build these relationships in the future.



Of the reported connections, most connections between districts occurred between Cohort I districts. This makes sense given that Cohort I met in person at the start of CEI and was in its 3rd year of participation. For example, one Cohort I district implemented a parent leadership program because it learned about this program at another district. Cohort II districts also reported linkages or connections by seeking advice or interacting outside of PLLN meetings within and outside of their cohort, but not to the same extent as Cohort I districts. For example, one Cohort II district reached out to a Cohort I district to learn about a parent workshop.