



21st Century California School Leadership Academy

External Evaluation Brief, 2021–2022

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OVERVIEW

The 21st Century California 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, how 21CSLA centralizes equity in professional learning, ways that 21CSLA can scale or replicate, and how 21CSLA connects with the SOS.

During the 2021–2022 school year, 21CSLA participants engaged in communities of practice (CoPs), localized professional learning (LPL), and/or coaching:

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

Regional Academies conducted 52 CoPs and 48 LPLs.¹

There were more than 2,400 unique registrants for CoPs, LPLs, and coaching offerings statewide.²

Four evaluation questions (EQ) guided the evaluation for 2021–2022:

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 21CSLA connect to the SOS?

Data for all four EQs were collected from focus groups of professional learning participants ($N = 29$), RA Leads ($N = 20$), and 21CSLA leadership ($N = 13$); surveys completed by respondents who actively participated in at least one professional learning opportunity ($N = 533$),³ Geographic Lead Agency representatives ($N = 11$), and Special Education Local Plan Area Lead Agency (SELPA Lead) representatives ($N = 12$); and program documents. Findings are described on the following pages.

¹ As reported by the 21CSLA Center

² Estimated from Regional Academy registrations lists provided in the fall and spring of Year 2 for the surveys. The spring list represents those who registered as of April 2022.

³ The survey was sent to 2,267 registrants. There were 624 respondents for a response rate of 28 percent, and 533 were included in the analysis. Incompletes were removed as well as surveys with respondents who did not recall participating in 21CSLA or did not attend any sessions for the registered offering. Not all respondents answered all questions. Throughout the report, the number of respondents (N) is included for the question addressed.

21CSLA IMPACT ON LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

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

21CSLA offerings influenced participants' knowledge and skills about evidence-based practices, continuous improvement, and equity as well as specific practices of continuous improvement and equity-focused leadership in their districts and schools.

Impact on Leader Knowledge, Skills, and Practice

- Participants reported gains in knowledge and skills on **effective instructional practices and practices to support student social-emotional learning (SEL)**. Examples they provided were in instruction for English language acquisition, collaboration across departments for both instruction and SEL, and moving from a compliance to a teaching and learning focus. 21CSLA's focus on **continuous improvement** translated into participants' use of tools to identify problems of practice, analyze root causes of problems, implement evidence-based practices, use inquiry cycles like Plan Do Study Act, and monitor changes.
- Participants also developed a continuous improvement mindset and skills to manage and coach staff through the change process. Most RA Leads and participants pointed to improvement science as building their skills in data use and an improvement mindset.

RA participant about continuous improvement:
"After reviewing how data can be incorrectly used within our EL [English learner] population, I revisited the tiers of my language learners to better serve their needs through practices taught in our sessions."

- Participants shared that they developed **skills in equity-focused leadership** with an increased understanding about racism, structural barriers to student success, and ways to identify and disrupt those barriers. Most participants reported **individual practice changes**, while a few noted **school- or district-level policy or practice changes** as a result of their participation in 21CSLA. For example, many survey and interview respondents described changing their practice to better support their colleagues with addressing inequities at their school, such as focusing on intentional use of data, creating a shared vision around equity, and facilitating conversations equitably.
- 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.

RA participant about equity-focused leadership:
"I engaged the instructional leadership team to revise a set of core values anchored in building a relationship-centered, equity-focused school by committing to adaptive changes to ensure equity for all. This includes using design thinking to identify levers to support school transformation."

- One **common barrier** to implementing changes in practice that interview participants raised was time demands placed on teachers and leaders related to teacher turnover, COVID-19 contact tracing, and substitute shortages. Some participants also noted that attending 21CSLA as an individual, without the support of a broader team or without genuine commitment from the school or district, impeded their ability to make changes that would impact student learning. One participant said, "I feel like I'm being offered this community of practice, which is great, great information, great people. But my workplace has not organized itself to do the work. Right? So, I'm actually in this frustrated, stuck place."

Impact on Staff or Students

- Most participants interviewed reported **anticipating an impact on student outcomes** in the future, such as increased student extracurricular engagement and a reduction in disproportionate special education referrals. They attributed these expectations to their development of knowledge and skills on how to create equitable systemic change at their district.
- Some interviewees shared that due to working on a problem of practice or conducting continuous improvement with 21CSLA they made changes in their schools or districts, which will or has led to a **direct impact on student outcomes**. For example, one school made changes to its master calendar combined with evidence-based instruction and progress monitoring, showing improvements in student reading scores. Leaders who focused on evidence-based practices for students' social-emotional needs or behavior challenges noted improved results on school climate surveys or a reduction in disproportionate suspensions, expulsions, and special education discipline.



CoP participant on anticipating student impact:
“When we’re truly doing a Plan Do Study Act cycle,... we’re using that cycle to inform and then seeing what’s working, and then using those things that work, and ultimately, it will impact those state measures that appear on the dashboard, and then we have positive outcomes for our students.”

Select Survey Findings

- Seventy-three percent ($N = 495$) of participants reported that they are implementing new practices because of their participation in 21CSLA.
- One main area where 21CSLA participants reported an increase in knowledge was in how to create equitable learning opportunities for underserved students in their school or district (83%, $N = 492$).

21CSLA Centralization of Equity

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

The 21CSLA State Center released a Guidance Document for RAs in June 2021, leading with the principle of prioritizing professional learning goals based on local need and prioritizing equity. Many RAs reported that their 2021–2022 offerings brought a greater emphasis on centering equity across all their offerings. RA Leads centralized equity in their structures and content. Participants highlighted how the equity content related to mindsets, practices, and improving equitable student outcomes.

Centralizing Equity in RA Structure

- RAs Leads reported in interviews that their offerings included **themes of equity and social justice** in continuous improvement approaches, regardless of the topic. For example, in some RAs, this year's coaching participants were asked to create an equity leadership goal that drove their work with a coach. In two other offerings, participants shared that they created action plans to hold themselves accountable to implement new equity practices.
- RAs tailored outreach and offerings to **target specific leader populations** such as leaders of color, African American leaders, male leaders, special education leaders, teacher leaders, leaders who serve English language learners, leaders in rural areas, leaders of small, private, and/or alternative schools, multilingual leaders, and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion leaders. RAs also diversified their offerings across regions to equalize the distribution of services.
- RA offerings responded to the necessity for leaders to address the needs of **specific student populations** that are not equitably served, such as Multilanguage Learners, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students.

RA Lead on equity-centered offerings: "The through line,... the focus on everything is equity centered, trying to support leaders with identifying problems of practice in their organizations wrapped around systemic inequities, particularly for underserved communities and their certain populations."

Centralizing Equity Within Professional Learning Content

- Most RA Leads shared that their offerings included content about the **connection between the education system and inequitable student outcomes** so that leaders could better understand how to analyze and change policies and procedures within these systems. Leaders reported that they wanted to improve their use of data and other continuous improvement tools for dismantling systemic racism.

- All RA Leads interviewed described their offerings as helping leaders understand and reflect on their own **biases and beliefs** to build a foundation to improve equitable practices at their schools and support school staff and leaders with their own critical reflection. One RA Lead described the efforts as "breaking through implicit bias barriers" to be a culturally responsive leader. In interviews and surveys, many participants reported that they learned to reflect on their own biases and how they influence decision-making, behaviors, students, and others around them.
- Most RA Leads referenced **changing leader mindsets** by viewing every challenge through an equity lens. RAs offered tools, like an equity pause, in which leaders were asked to pause as they managed a challenge at their school or district and ask, "Is this equitable for all of us? Are groups missing? Or are there voices that are not heard?"
- All RAs discussed building participant skills in **continuous improvement that address inequitable systems and practices** at their district and support their staff through implementing these changes. Many of the RA CoP and LPL and CoP offerings focused on helping leaders address an equity-related problem of practice and dilemmas to meet explicit equity needs of districts and schools in their region. Participants reported in interviews and surveys that they built skills in helping educators to reflect upon their personal attitudes, biases, and roles in creating equitable opportunities, tackling hard topics, providing a safe space for equity discussions, using SEL signature practices in meetings, including all voices in decisions about systems, and asking questions of their staff on how teams implemented equitable practices.



LPL participant on equity content: “This idea of understanding who we are in the world of equity as an individual,... so me as a white man, heterosexual, ... and what I bring to whatever space I walk into, to help understand ... what [students] are up against, as well as staff.... Looking at my own role and figuring out ‘What can I do to further the equity work in state and federal accountability?’”

RA Lead about equity content: “And one thing that we really spent time on in my session, but then I also saw in all the recurring sessions, were how do leaders develop this critical consciousness in knowing that every decision, every action, every commitment, no matter what your role is, is grounded in equity.”

Select Survey Findings

- Participants reported that because of their participation in 21CSLA, they were knowledgeable of how to help educators reflect upon their personal attitudes, biases, and roles in creating equitable opportunities (83%, $N = 493$).
- More than half of participants said that as a result of their participation in 21CSLA they were more confident than they had been in their ability to change inequitable policies and practices at their school that lead to systemic inequities (60%, $N = 487$).
- Ninety percent of participants ($N = 491$) selected equity-focused leadership content as one of the program elements most helpful for their learning.
- Eighty-five percent of participants ($N = 491$) selected equity-focused instructional content as one of the program elements most helpful for their learning.

21CSLA Replicability of Effective Professional Learning

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

Effective professional learning is intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; centered on content, continuous improvement, and equitable student outcomes; and collaborative.⁴ 21CSLA demonstrated effective professional learning that can be replicated, with RAs making improvements to their offerings in 2021–2022. Participants emphasized collaboration, coaching, and application of their learning as necessary components for their changes in practice.

Effective Professional Learning Components

- The 2021–2022 school year was the 2nd year of implementation for 21CSLA. RA Leads reported applying their learnings from Year 1 to change the structure and content of their offerings. Examples of common **adjustments to structures** were having more frequent and shorter sessions as opposed to fewer and longer sessions, allowing for practical implementation between sessions; providing more opportunities for individual coaching; providing a broader selection of offerings to align with participant needs; adapting materials; finding the best providers for specific offerings; and offering sessions that were more advanced, building on Year 1 foundations. **Content adjustments** emerged from assessing regional needs, such as the new ethnic studies requirement in California, specific equity-related instruction and SEL topics, and support for demands on leaders due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

RA Lead about improvements in this year's offerings:

"We've got more and more feedback. Last year it was ... ready, go, aim. So, we were able to get feedback from our participants, as well as continuing to build the relationships with districts and other county offices and having more opportunities to get direct needs assessment."

- RA Leads reported in their interviews that they **used data and needs assessments** to inform their offerings. The offerings were then tailored to **need-related problems of practice** by grouping participants in role-alike groups according to similar school contexts and by providing content and tools so leaders could address emerging needs and challenges at their sites. Participants interviewed shared that offerings were tailored to their needs. Some shared ways to improve this tailoring by giving guidance on how to communicate with staff about the work and how to organize the work into smaller pieces to help make implementation attainable.

- Findings confirm that RAs offered active learning opportunities in which **leaders collaborate** with one another to address issues in their day-to-day work. One participant emphasized that being on a team from the school district helped the participant decide on and implement skills practiced in a CoP. RA Leads and participants highlighted the usefulness of collaborating across school districts on shared topics of interest. A common theme among individual leaders was their desire to have team members attend to work on their problem of practice together.

CoP participant about wanting collaboration with an internal team: "Sometimes trying to make the connection between what I've heard at the academy and putting it into practice on my team, that's my learning curve. So that can be sometimes a little bit like, 'Oh, I wish my team had heard that thing.'"

LPL participant about collaboration: "We had breakout sessions, which I think is extremely beneficial to internalize the information, analyze it, understand the information, and make sense of what you were receiving. I appreciated that there was time for collaboration and discussion."

⁴ Bishop, J., Darling-Hammond, L., & Jaquith, A. (2015). *Maximizing the use of new state professional learning investments to support student, educator, and school growth*. Learning Policy Institute; California Department of Education. (2015). *The superintendent's quality professional learning standards: Approved by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction*.


RA Lead on participant reactions to collaboration:

“That cross-pollination from school to school district to district is something, and the opportunity to engage with each other and share and collaborate around a specific topic has really been something that has been appreciated inside of the communities of practice.”

- An emerging finding from a subset of RA Leads and participants suggests that participants who experienced both coaching and a CoP at the same time with coherent content may have enhanced impact compared with participating in just one or the other. Participants interviewed about the integrated approach appreciated the ongoing coaching support as they wrestled with their problem of practice through their CoP, while RA Leads in four regions noted that participants in CoPs wanted coaching to support their application of continuous improvement tools or implementation of equity plans.
- Many participants interviewed who engaged in CoPs or LPLs but not coaching desired ongoing coaching support to apply skills learned once they returned to their school or district context. Others experienced their CoP or LPL over the course of 2 years, sharing that they expanded on concepts by applying them over a period of time. Overall, 21CSLA participants highlighted that the opportunity and support for practicing new skills was a valuable outcome of 21CSLA participation.

School leader: “Having a thought partner, having someone to process and someone to help, almost support difficult conversations with staff, running it, almost modeling it and practicing it with my coach has been really helpful.”

District leader about wanting coaching and a site

team to work with: “I want more though. I’m going to be honest, that’s why I’m here, because I want coaching. I think it would be helpful... I feel like it would be beneficial for my team to go through this learning together. And you look at one of our problems and practice together and maybe get some coaching. So, that’s kind of what I think a good next step would be.”

Select Survey Findings

- A majority (83%, $N = 496$) of respondents participating in either CoPs or LPL sessions reported they had opportunities to discuss challenges related to students at their school or district “most of the time” or “always.”
- Over 80% of participants reported that the opportunity to talk with colleagues; collaborate with others who had a similar school context (e.g., demographics and needs); and the opportunity to practice new skills were the main helpful elements of their professional learning experience.
- Collaboration and coaching offered participants advice, collegial feedback, opportunities to reflect, and/or new strategies to test in school contexts. Eighty-five percent ($N = 194$) of coaching participants reported that their coach asked questions that expanded their thinking, 82% ($N = 194$) reported that the sessions were useful to their day-to-day practice as a leader, and 81% ($N = 195$) reported that the sessions supported their growth in how to advance equity in their school or district.
- Almost all participants (99%, $N = 424$ CoP and LPL participants; 82%, $N = 194$ coaching participants) indicated that professional learning facilitators and coaches were knowledgeable of the content needed to guide learning. Overall, participants, in interviews and surveys, related that coaches and facilitators were knowledgeable about issues related to equity.
- Overall, 87% ($N = 495$) of CoP and LPL participants, and 83% ($N = 197$) of coaching participants, found that their experience in 21CSLA was an effective use of their time.

21CSLA Connections to SOS

EQ4: How does 21CSLA connect to the SOS?

The 21CSLA State Center and RA Leads reported on intentional interactions within the SOS. A few RA Leads pointed to work with State Agencies, Geographic Lead Agencies,³ SELPA Leads,⁴ and other agencies in the SOS to inform their offerings and communicate about potential partnerships to support leaders in their regions. Most RA Leads mentioned county offices of education (COEs) and some mentioned SELPAs when asked about the SOS, and both the 21CSLA State Center and RA Leads reported on connections outside of the SOS Lead Agencies.

How 21CSLA Worked With SOS Partners to Support Local Education Agencies

- 21CSLA State Center leadership staff members reported interacting with SOS Lead Agencies as part of their outreach strategy during 2021–2022. They connected with SOS Lead Agencies on social media, shared RA offerings with SELPA Leads, and communicated with the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) and California Department of Education, including adding submissions to CCEE newsletters to let leaders know about general offerings across the state (e.g., resulting in one webinar with 375 attendees).
- 21CSLA State Center leadership staff members reported connections and partnerships with SOS Lead Agencies. These included having an Equity Lead representative on the Center's Advisory Council; inviting CCEE and State Board of Education guest speakers to the RA Collectives Retreat; outreach to the new Computer Science Educator Workforce Investment Grant program to plan a partnered professional development offering that connects computer science and leadership; connecting with a Community Engagement Initiative Agency that hosted a 21CSLA-led intervisitation meet-up to plan for RA professional learning offerings, also featuring a Multi-Tiered System of Supports Lead Agency; participating in the Data Culture and Use Work Group run by a Geographic Lead Agency; and presenting at a conference coordinated by an Equity Lead Agency.
- One RA Lead reported that coaches are staff members from COEs and regularly interact with the Geographic Lead Agency in the region and Multi-Tiered System of Supports Lead Agency. The RA Lead mentioned a benefit in exploring the System Improvement Lead because of the overlap in improvement work. Two other RA Leads described partnering with SOS Lead Agencies in the region to provide offerings as part of 21CSLA. For example, in one RA, a SELPA Lead facilitates a CoP for special education leaders, and the special education Educator Workforce Investment Grant program leads another offering.

- RA Leads reported that they wanted to work with Leads in the SOS. One noted not having been directly involved with SELPA Leads but “could benefit from exploring” work with the SELPA System Improvement Lead because of overlapping goals. Another wondered how to get leaders at districts and regional leads in the SOS to endorse the 21CSLA work: “What is the best way to communicate offerings and scale?”

RA Lead about 21CSLA as part of the SOS: “You’ve seen that onion, that’s the California system of support, and 21 CSLA falls into that resource leads and initiatives. So, we’ve also just started highlighting that to the different counties. Like, ‘Hey, we actually are part of this. We’re not just this one-off program that is one and done... We’ve been working on ways to continue the work beyond 1 year for any given participant... So, it’s really starting to expand and make its way.”

RA Lead about potential SOS collaboration: “There is certainly room to grow the SOS integration which will provide coherence and aid sustainability; we are uniquely poised, given overlapping duties in rural schools, counties.”

³ As part of the SOS, Geographic Lead Agencies build the capacity of other county offices of education in their area, coordinating and providing Differentiated Assistance.

⁴ As part of the SOS, SELPA Leads provide capacity building support in special education content areas and in system improvement so that an integrated educational system meets the needs of all learners, including students with disabilities.



How 21CSLA Connected Beyond SOS Partners to Support Local Education Agencies

- Outside of specific Lead Agencies within the SOS, most RA Leads talked about connecting with COEs or SELPAs, specifically for assessing needs in the region to inform their offerings or creating an offering for a SELPA or COE that has a leadership need.
- The 21CSLA State Center staff also has connections outside of the SOS, with representation on the Center's Advisory Council from state-level professional organizations (California County Superintendents Educational Services Association [CCSESA], Association of California School Administrators [ACSA], California School Boards Association, Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CTC], California Teacher Education Research and Improvement Network, California Association of Latino Superintendents and Administrators). Staff members disseminated joint media communications with the University of California, Los Angeles, and presented on 21CSLA at state-level professional conferences and meetings (ACSA, CTC, California Department of Education [CDE] Equity Summit) and at the American Education Research Association held in San Diego. They also presented on 21CSLA, along with RA Lead staff, at the California Educational Research Association Conference and the Curriculum and Instruction Steering Committee (part of the CCSESA curriculum conference).
- The 21CSLA State Center also participates in CDE's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) constellation team which coordinates UPK implementation across the state, and CDE's Educator Diversity Working Group convened by the state superintendent of public instruction to recommend ways to increase California's Educator Workforce.

RA Lead about general collaboration: "One of the hallmarks about collaboration across this region is that ... I see people from all these different groups working together. It's starting to look like people aren't just standing their turf. County office people are offering their suggestions. They're throwing in their resources.... District people are doing the same thing. I don't think we've got anybody trying to stay in their silo, I think we've kind of knocked the silos down quite a bit."

Select Findings From SOS Lead Survey

- Geographic Leads reported moderate to strong connections with 21CSLA. Of 10 Geographic Lead representatives surveyed, 70% wanted to continue the same level of collaboration, while 20% sought more.
- Of 12 SELPA Lead representatives surveyed, 83% wanted more collaboration with 21CSLA.
- Seven out of 12 Geographic Lead representatives surveyed noted that 21CSLA is a state partner helping them be more effective in their role and that they access 21CSLA resources. No SELPA Leads reported accessing 21CSLA resources or having specific connections with 21CSLA.