Study of the Engage New England Initiative Cross-Site Learning Brief 3

Improving Instructional Systems

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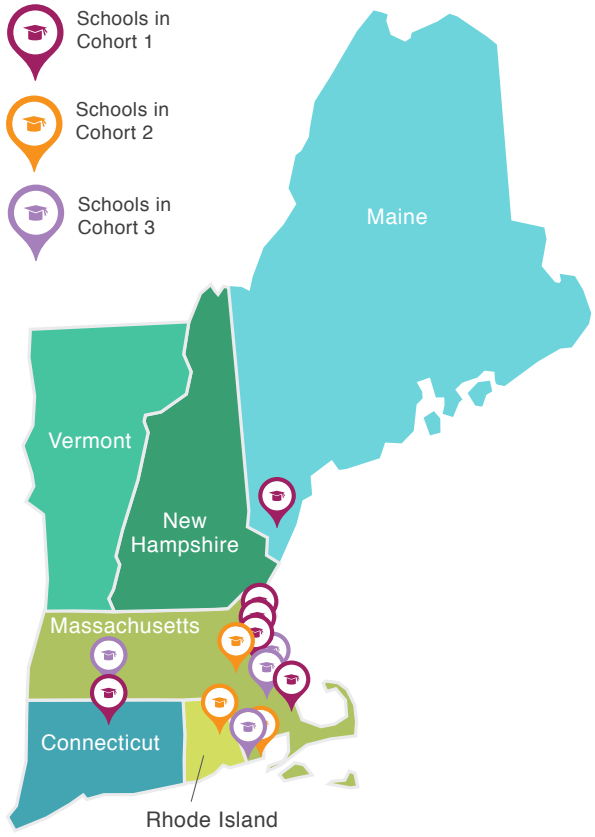
Cover photo: CREC Impact Academy

Introduction

In 2017, the Barr Foundation launched Engage New England (ENE), an Education Team initiative that provides local education agencies and nonprofit organizations a unique opportunity to plan for and develop innovative schools to serve students who are off track to graduate from high school. School design partner Springpoint has guided three cohorts of ENE grantees through a year-long design process and is providing 3 years of continued support for the pilot, launch, and development of the new or redesigned schools.



In 2019–20, Springpoint supported 13 ENE grantees, 11 of which were operating schools, and 2 of which were designing new schools. Five cohort 1 schools were in their second year of implementation; one was in its first year after receiving an additional year of planning support. Two cohort 2 schools were in their pilot year and one was continuing to plan to launch a new school; the four cohort 3 schools were engaged in the planning year, with three redesigning existing schools and one planning for the launch of a new school.

From its inception, the ENE initiative's theory of action has centered on the idea that designing schools around the tenets of Positive Youth Development (PYD) would create learning environments that offer all students the opportunity to thrive. Springpoint's planning support for the first two cohorts led grantees through a whole-school design process guided by the PYD tenets.

Over the first 2 years of the initiative, the foundation and Springpoint learned that grantees excelled in fostering strong teacher-student relationships and needed the most support in creating consistently engaging and rigorous learning experiences.

Positive Youth Development

The initiative relies on Springpoint's *How Students Thrive: Positive Youth Development in Practice* framework, which identifies five PYD tenets:

- Caring, trusting, and supportive relationships
- High expectations
- Voice, choice, and contributions
- Engaging learning experiences
- Consistency

To better meet these grantee needs, Springpoint revised the planning process for cohort 3 to hone-in on instruction as the primary mechanism for creating schools that embody PYD and to provide clearly defined sequential stages for implementing new instructional systems. Springpoint also focused its supports for cohorts 1 and 2 more directly on improving instruction. This approach recognizes that strong instruction, undergirded by regular support from instructional leaders, is the critical lever through which PYD tenets can be operationalized to meet students' academic and social-emotional needs. With some variation by cohort and grantee, in 2019–20 Springpoint supported grantees to initiate the following instructional systems improvements:

- Implement Transformative Learning Experiences (TLEs) developed by Springpoint and designed to provide rigorous and engaging learning experiences
- Build instructional systems including well-defined student competencies and competency rubrics
- Institute regular and robust looking at student work (LASW) practices to norm expectations and guide instructional improvement
- Develop instructional leadership capacity

SRI Education, the research partner for the ENE initiative, captured the grantees' learnings about improving instructional systems through interviews of school leaders, school staff members, and external partners; student focus groups; and staff surveys.

Data Collection by the Numbers

- 70% staff survey response rate
- 86 interviews
- 32 student focus group participants

Lessons about Improving Instructional Systems

This brief describes common facilitators and challenges experienced by grantees as they worked to further their instructional systems. It also provides some promising practices that grantees used to support these efforts or to address challenges.

Given the unique challenges posed by the shift to remote learning at the end of the 2019–20 school year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this brief focuses primarily on in-school practices from September through mid-March. However, because schools are engaging in a virtual or hybrid in-person/virtual model of instruction in 2020–21, the brief concludes with a link to a resource to support virtual instruction.[1]

Photo: Map Academy

[1] Spring data collection was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted most of the site visits virtually. As a result, we did not conduct student surveys, and we were limited in the number of interviews, student focus groups, classroom observations we could complete.

Lessons about Improving Instructional Systems

The three cohorts were at different stages of the initiative, with some still planning or piloting new systems supported through the ENE grant and others 2 years into implementation. However, all but two ENE grantees were operating schools (the exceptions were two grantees launching new schools) and all were working to develop or improve their instructional systems. Their varied experiences offer lessons that grantees can learn from each other and that other schools engaging in this type of school improvement effort may consider.

Implementing Transformative Learning Experiences

All but three ENE schools implemented TLEs, beginning with a pilot either in fall 2019 for cohorts 1 and 2 schools and in spring 2020 for cohort 3 schools shortly before schools closed. All grantees started their pilot efforts with TLEs created by Springpoint, but a small number also created their own project-based learning units modeled after the TLEs.

> *I am so enamored with [TLEs] because… in the traditional high school sense, there's this coverage need… I think that for an alternative school to try to structure its instructional offerings around that coverage of all that content, you're going to fail miserably. Having our instructional focus around this integrated, highly relevant model where the thinking, the integration of content with intellectual discovery and exploration processes are the focus, I think is a win-win for our students and teachers.*
>
> *– School Leader*

Grantees who fully embraced TLEs saw their potential for increasing the rigor and relevance of their students' learning experiences. Some leaders and teachers reported that TLEs shifted how they approach infusing relevance into their school curriculum and engaging the community. Further, the TLEs pushed them to raise their expectations for students and the work students produce. For students, the opportunity to present to authentic audiences—a recommended performance task for TLEs—was particularly engaging and increased the appeal of the TLEs.

Transformative Learning Experiences

TLEs are "project-based units of study that promote deeper learning and develop college and career-ready competencies."

TLEs are characterized by five key components:

- Unifying guiding question
- Multi-dimensional performance tasks
- Expectations for student performance
- Logical arc of learning milestones
- Inquiry-based daily lessons

More details on each of the five components and criteria for TLEs can be found here.

School leaders and staff in some schools reported that because TLEs were more engaging to students, attendance—a persistent problem for many grantees—improved. Moreover, staff from

Photo: Boston Day and Evening Academy

two grantees shared that the quality of student writing noticeably improved over the course of TLE implementation. One school leader described students' success with personal narratives:

> *"Their personal narratives have just been incredibly successful... They choose an audience... there hasn't been one of them that hasn't just had its incredible moment. So, those, I would say that's where I've seen rigor being met and sometimes, beyond expectations."*

However, TLEs represented a significant change in instructional practice at many of these grantees, and the following implementation challenges emerged during the initial TLE pilot:

- The content of TLEs did not always resonate with the student population.
- Teachers found it difficult to find enough time to plan effectively for launching TLEs, especially later in the school year. Planning for fall semester TLEs was easier because teachers could use their summer professional development time.
- Because TLEs were often more rigorous than the standard curriculum, grantees struggled to adequately scaffold students for success.
- Teachers struggled to stay on pace with the TLE units, and the amount of time it took students to complete them was detrimental to maintaining a high level of student engagement.

Although most grantees had only piloted a small number of TLEs, some early lessons emerged for how to successfully implement these units.

Empowering teachers to adapt TLEs while maintaining the rigor of the units can strengthen student and teacher engagement in the TLEs.

Some grantees noted that the TLE content was not always relevant and accessible for all students which made it difficult to keep students engaged in the TLEs. Encouraging teachers to modify these units by providing clear guidelines about what aspects of the TLEs are and are not appropriate to adapt can foster teacher ownership of these units while preserving their rigor and relevance. As one leader said, "That's a lot of feedback I give to teachers is [that]—this is a project that was formulated by another teacher, at another school, and you have to adjust it to fit our needs here and our students."

Teachers across the cohort 1 and 2 grantees experimented with modifications to the TLEs to make them more relevant to the local context and to increase or maintain student engagement. For example, one teacher said some of the lessons in the Citizen Food unit were not culturally relevant for the school's population which affected student engagement early on. The teacher dropped some of the beginning lessons once she noticed the amount of shame students had about talking about what they eat and the lack of cultural pride around food. She described the experience and how she would modify it in the future:

> *"Starting off the unit with those assignments that are supposed to invoke pride and sharing your culture and your food, just kind of flopped immediately, which set a rough tone for the rest of the unit just because they don't really have much accessibility to food; and the food they do have accessible to them is not nutritious, and there's a lot of shame around that. If I do it again, I want to adjust it to our specific kids and make it more empowering, like looking at systems at play first rather than what they eat first."*

Photo: Phoenix Charter Academy Chelsea

Similarly, teachers at a cohort 2 grantee changed how the Cover Letter TLE was introduced as they felt that the early lessons on cross-generational differences were not interesting nor relevant to students. Instead, teachers began the lessons with a discussion about how students are stereotyped. A teacher implementing the Gentrification TLE at a cohort 1 grantee skipped aspects of the unit related to developing technical skills of photography to emphasize other skills and concepts addressed in the unit. This grantee also built the photography fieldwork required by the Gentrification TLE into the school day to accommodate students who had work and other responsibilities outside of school.

The Springpoint coach was an available resource for teachers as they considered adaptations. A

grantee-based instructional coach described how the coach provided feedback on changes teachers wanted to make to the units:

> *"I think [Springpoint has] the things that they want to impart on us, but then at the same time, [they are] very, very receptive if we kind of go back to [the coach] and say this was a great idea, but then we wanted to make a change to this because of X, Y, or Z. [The TLE teacher] will send him sample units and driving questions and have him check in on that stuff. He'll give feedback and push it back to us, but I think that he has been a very valuable resource. Clearly there are things that they want to get us going on and at the same time will take feedback from us and help us think about ways to do that, while still kind of keeping the integrity of the TLE and the integrity of the school goals..."*

For its most recent TLE units being implemented in the 2020–21 school year, Springpoint has included in a cover sheet guidance for how teachers can adapt the TLEs while maintaining the rigor of the units.

TLEs that cover emotionally challenging content are an opportunity to support social-emotional learning and development but require integrated supports to be respectful and supportive of students' life experiences and trauma.

Grantees noted that several of the TLEs contained content that was emotionally challenging for students. For example, staff at some of the cohort 1 and 2 schools pointed to parts of the Opioid Crisis and Citizen Food TLEs that were emotionally triggering for some students due to firsthand experiences with drug addiction, food insecurity, or unhealthy relationships with food.

Some grantees elected to address this issue by reordering or removing these aspects of the TLEs. However, one cohort 2 grantee used emotionally challenging TLEs as an opportunity to support the development of students' social- emotional development, making additional clinical staff available to students during these units. In future implementation of these units, this grantee plans to have these clinical staff push-in to provide integrated social-emotional learning supports.

Because of the increased rigor of TLE units, providing adequate scaffolding for students is crucial for student success.

Grantees had to provide additional scaffolding for students, particularly around writing, to support student success with TLEs, which were often more academically challenging than their other assignments. To inform what scaffolding to provide, grantees collected diagnostic data, such as students' performance in prior TLEs and regular assessments of students' math and reading skills.

> *In both classes, I've had a couple of kids who are just at a much lower academic level than the rest of the class; and it's hard to put in the right accommodations and modifications to help them succeed in the projects which are great for the kids who are college bound, but sometimes our more concrete learners have a harder time with the higher level concepts.*
>
> *– Teacher*

Some of the scaffolding grantees built to support students included the following:

- **Offering targeted supports for English Learners (ELs).** A cohort 1 teacher implementing a TLE with a large EL population created sentence starters for writing assignments and worked 1:1 with students with weaker skills in written English.
- **Strengthening student writing skills.** A cohort 3 science teacher realized students were struggling with the writing tasks in the Citizen Food TLE. She paused the rollout of the TLE unit and asked the school's instructional coach to teach a class on argumentative writing and provide additional scaffolds and writing templates for students.
- **Implementing co-teaching to support students.** A cohort 2 grantee shifted to a co-teaching model during the 2019–20 academic year in four classes, one of which implemented the Citizen Food TLE. In this model, one teacher led the class while the other teacher worked with a smaller group of students who were struggling with the content and/or had missed a lot of class.

Finding the time and staff to help students who were on different timelines to complete the TLEs—sometimes because of their inconsistent class attendance—was another challenge to providing adequate scaffolding for students. The co-teaching model as previously described was a helpful model for supporting students with inconsistent attendance. Further, one cohort 1 grantee that enrolls students in classes on a rolling basis throughout the year had plans to pair students who are further along in the TLE process with those who are just starting. The grantee posits that pairing students in this way will not only help students catch up, but also provide opportunities for students to collaborate and learn from each other.

Developing Competency-based Learning Systems

Six of the nine cohort 1 and 2 grantees and all four cohort 3 grantees had or planned to have competency-based learning systems in place at their schools. In 2019–20, Springpoint introduced a sequenced approach to developing competency-based learning systems, beginning with building staff and student understanding and selecting three to four prioritized competencies as prerequisite conditions. Grantees' systems were in various stages of development, with most still in phase 1—norming around prioritized competencies and rubrics/performance definitions to create a shared language that informs instructional decisions—as defined by Springpoint.

Well-articulated competencies with clearly defined performance rubrics that both teachers and students understand can be powerful tools for instructional improvement. In these early stages of implementation, grantees struggled with adopting rubrics and norming on what constitutes high-quality student work so that both teachers and students have a firm understanding of and shared language around the competencies.

Adopting or adapting existing competencies can provide a solid foundation for schools to build their own competency-based system.

Adopting and/or adapting vetted, high-quality competency-based systems can free up time for educators to devote to activities that can support the successful implementation of these systems. The experience of practitioners who support successful adoption of competency-based

Phases of Implementing Competency-based Learning Systems

Springpoint recommends a phased approach to implementing competency-based learning systems.

Phase 1: Developing a common language	Focus on norming around prioritized competencies and rubrics/ performance definitions and use competencies to select and focus TLEs.
Phase 2: Building core systems	Align student learning experiences to competencies in a sequenced way; students play larger role in assessing their work and driving feedback conversations with teachers. Shift to competency-based grading from assignment-based grading; pilot and adopt a learning management system
Phase 3: Personalizing pathways	Move to a personalized school structure and enable individual student progression; it can take years to reach this phase.

More details on these phases can be found here.

systems suggests that educators often get caught up in the "swamp" of unpacking, rewording, and revising competencies rather than trying out the competencies and rubrics and engaging in deeper discussions to build shared understanding.[2] The adoption of vetted competencies and rubrics allows educators to engage in more substantive activities early on instead of spending time struggling with the wording of each competency or rubric. For example, they can spend their time focusing on looking at student work protocols to calibrate around the competencies and their rubrics, learning how to provide high-quality feedback to students, and supporting students to understand the competencies and transition to the new system.

Recognizing the benefits of providing competencies and rubrics for schools to build upon, Springpoint provided cohort 3 grantees with a set of resources:

- Prioritized core competencies (Argue, Discern, and Communicate)
- Attainments (3-4 subskills students need to master to show mastery/proficiency in each competency)
- Rubrics for each attainment to assess progress toward mastery/proficiency

Attainments and rubrics for each of the three prioritized competencies can be found here: Communicate, Discern, Argue.

Springpoint introduced these resources during the May 2020 master classes to provide competency exemplars that grantees could adopt or adapt. This allowed cohort 3 grantees to devote more time to refining, applying, and calibrating these rubrics with their staff to establish the shared language and expectations that underlie a competency-based learning system rather than defining and wordsmithing the competencies themselves.

At the end of the May master class, several design leads commented on how helpful it was to have exemplars to adapt. One design lead noted that when she and her colleagues broke off into their

[2] Sturgis, C. (2017). *Growing into the Framework: D51's Implementation Strategy*. Retrieved from https://aurora-institute.org/cw_post/growing-into-the-framework-d51s-implementation-strategy/

small group to try to develop their own rubric for one of the *Argue* attainments, "I can state a claim," they spent a lot of time choosing the right verb when the power of competencies is actually using them to discuss student work, norming around the rubrics, and developing a common language. Participants from another grantee expressed relief during their small group discussion that the work of developing the competency rubrics was already done for them so that they can focus on adopting and adapting the rubrics for their own school.

Prioritizing a smaller number of competencies facilitates building deeper understanding among teachers and students.

A cohort 2 grantee developed five competencies during the planning year but elected to focus on just one competency (*Argue*) during its pilot year. During the year, staff began to align their instruction to this competency and used student work to calibrate on and improve the rubrics for the three attainments that fall under the *Argue* competency. The school leader noted the need for clearer language to ensure understanding:

> *"We've found that some of the steps between approaches, meets, and exceeds are uneven, and/or someone could interpret the way something was written under approaches differently. We have to make sure that the language was really clear, that the steps were even, and it was student friendly."*

Another grantee overhauled its course structure in summer 2019. Courses were shortened and each explicitly aligned to a single competency. Administrators and staff reported that the new course structure was very successful in keeping students focused on completing courses, and having each course aligned to a single competency made the credit system clearer to students.

Photo: Phoenix Charter Academy Chelsea

Schools must explicitly support students in making the shift to a competency-based system.

Several grantees reported that strengthening student understanding and use of the competencies and rubric/performance definitions remained a work in progress. As one teacher noted, "It's hard to find a way to explain thoroughly to them what the competencies are and why they are important, even though they are learning them every day." In particular, grantees struggled with making the language in the competencies accessible for all students.

To build student understanding, staff engaged in the following promising practices:

- **Reflecting on competencies**. Teachers at one school reported having discussions about the competencies aligned to their course and asking students to reflect on their mastery of the competency at the end of the course.
- **Improving accessibility for English Learners.** At another school, teachers said

that they broke down the complex language of the competencies into simpler language and translated the competencies for students with limited English proficiency who make up a large proportion of the student population.

- **Introducing competencies at schoolwide orientations.** Several grantees held schoolwide orientations at the start of the school year to introduce students to the competencies.
- **Developing scripts for teachers to use when introducing competencies**. At a cohort 3 grantee, a small team of teachers was working on developing written scripts to introduce each competency so that all students, including those with low English proficiency, can understand and access the meaning of the competencies.

Instituting Looking at Student Work Practices

Grantees reported looking at student work to align staff on what high-quality work is and to identify gaps and areas of weakness for specific student interventions and to inform next steps for instruction. Interviewed staff recognized the need to analyze student work for these purposes and saw direct benefits to instruction by focusing on student products.

> *I think it's really, really helpful to look at it with other people because I think that especially when you spend a long time working with a kid on a piece you could stop seeing it a little bit. I think other people have different eyes that can really help you see things that you might not be seeing. I think that having the space and the time to look at student work with colleagues is really, really helpful.*
>
> *– Teacher*

Running Successful LASW Meetings

Productive LASW meetings contain the following components:

- Skilled facilitator
- Protocol to guide the discussion
- Sufficient volume of student work to recognize differences in quality
- Exemplars of high-quality work
- Time to review the work and engage in discussion
- Open and willing participants

LASW meeting success criteria can be found here.

Yet several challenges emerged as schools tried to implement looking at student work (LASW) practices:

- Teachers struggled to come to consensus on what high-quality work looks like, and schools had no systematic strategy for dealing with misalignment.
- Teachers lacked a necessary volume of student work (examples of the same assignments from different students at the same time) for calibration.
- Teachers lacked exemplars of high-quality student work to inform their discussions, though some teachers saw TLEs as generating exemplars.
- Reviewing student work products and coming to consensus took a long time.
- LASW time was often usurped by student issues that were perceived to be more pressing and urgent.

The following lessons surfaced for how to support LASW practices.

Consistent, structured, and protected time for LASW meetings is critical for ensuring teachers are able to come to a common understanding of student work quality and how to address students' skill gaps.

Grantees that reported regularly looking at student work to norm/calibrate and refine assignments had time set aside at weekly meetings specifically for that purpose. For example, teachers at one school reported looking at student work every day to identify students who needed more support and connected with them the following day. Teachers at this school also met formally once a week to look at student work together. Another school had biweekly PLC meetings and weekly critical friends groups, during which they looked at student work. The leaders at this school also met each morning to look at student work to inform their coaching of teachers and professional development offerings.

Assigning time to look at student work is not enough, though—the time must be protected. One school planned to use time at weekly staff meetings to look at student work, but student issues often took precedence:

> *"We want to do it. We care about it, it's important, and when kids' stuff comes up, it always seems to trump. Again, we just have to make some sacred time. …we've got to figure out a way we can commit as a whole group. We just do."*

This leader recognized the need to protect time to be proactive in determining strategies to support student learning rather than reacting to immediate needs. In order to protect time for more proactive work like looking at student work, leaders may need to set aside time for separate meetings in which student issues can be addressed. Particularly with student populations that have considerable social-emotional needs, issues will inevitably arise that need staff attention. Carving out separate space and time for leaders and teachers to be proactive and reactive is essential.

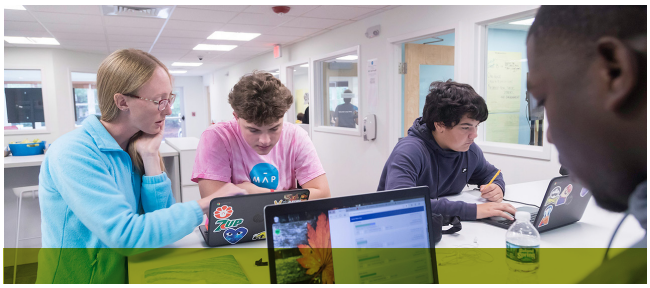


Photo: Map Academy

Using a Looking at Student Work protocol helps focus discussions and supports teachers to diagnose student gaps and inform next steps for instruction.

Springpoint provided a protocol for schools to use as they analyzed student work products which several schools found to be very useful. Respondents reported that the protocol helped them identify common weaknesses across students. One teacher explained, "To actually look holistically, there's 30 kids in this class and nobody can do this skill. That's a helpful exercise. We just find that in every class, it's the same thing. They can't go from a quote to an analytical statement... doesn't matter [the subject]. It's a skill we need to teach first."

Adhering to a protocol during LASW meetings helps keep participants on task and maintain time for LASW discussion. In the absence of a protocol, interview respondents shared that it was easy for conversations to veer off track to address a perceived student need or crisis.

Exemplars of high-quality student work facilitate teacher alignment and establishment of school-wide quality standards.

Interview respondents indicated that teachers came into LASW discussions with different expectations and standards for quality. At one school, for example, teachers fell into two camps: those that thought standards should be high across the board, i.e., this is an A paper regardless of where the student started from; and those who thought they should take into account where students started and their growth. The leader described the process of discussing the standards for the senior project and how it illuminated the existing differences in standards across the staff:

> *"…people got fired up and were definitely all over the place; what we thought was proficient, what we thought was distinguished, and I would say half the team thought we were being way too hard and our standards were higher than the mainstream, and half the team wanted to have those high standards. So, it was an interesting, good conversation. I think it revealed a lot about where we were at and how we're going to get closer to the same place."*

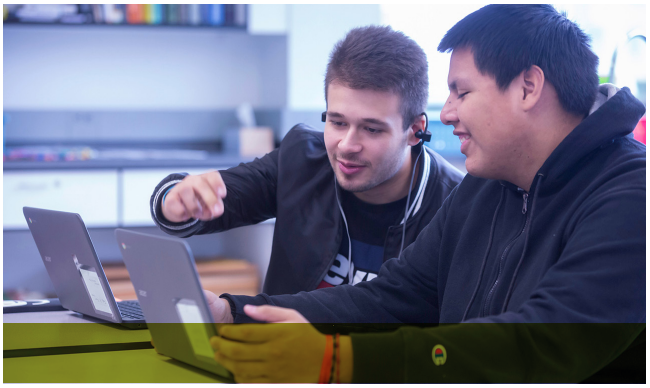


Photo: Chelsea Opportunity Academy

One leader at a school with more consistent LASW practices emphasized the importance of high-quality, teacher-created exemplars to help teachers become aligned on what high-quality work looks like. She reported that early in the school year, teacher alignment was "wishy washy"; but over the course of TLE implementation, teachers created exemplars which helped refine their understanding of "good" versus "great" work. The exemplars also helped the students to be able to dissect and improve their own work. Springpoint now provides vetted student work and rubrics for teachers to use as they look at student work.

Building Instructional Leadership

Core to improving instructional systems within a school is leadership's ability to articulate and communicate an instructional vision, establish the necessary structures and procure resources in support of this vision, and help teachers to implement it well. Across the grantees, leaders came into the initiative with varying experiences and skill levels as instructional leaders. Over the course of the initiative, Springpoint has worked with school leaders to build these skills through individual coaching. This continued in 2019–20, when Springpoint coaches worked with school leaders on instructional leadership practices, including coaching, observing classrooms, and providing feedback.

Despite intentions, leaders encountered challenges in supporting teachers to improve their instruction. Most commonly, leaders reported lacking time to observe and coach teachers because of schedule constraints and low staff capacity. Some leaders newer to the position also needed support with how to coach teachers and provide actionable feedback.

Leaders must be strategic to ensure they devote sufficient time to instructional leadership, including building an instructional leadership team and protecting time for coaching and observations.

Throughout the initiative, leaders have struggled with balancing their time between attending to administrative duties and providing instructional support. Many of the ENE schools have a small staff with a single school leader who wears many hats, including teaching. In these cases, leaders had to reduce or give up teaching loads, learn how to delegate, and/or add internal or external instructional coaches.

On the survey, schools where teachers reported higher levels of instructional leadership—where leaders observed teachers and provided feedback and looked at student work to drive expectations and instructional next steps—had consistent structures in place to support observations and coaching. These structures included expanded instructional leadership teams, regular observation schedules, and regular professional learning community meetings. For example, at one school the principal and assistant principal observed classes at least weekly and the principal led a biweekly PLC. Teachers also had time to support each other in looking at student work and designing rigorous curriculum during weekly critical friends groups.

In contrast, the leader at another school intended to observe each teacher weekly, but this schedule fell off by the spring semester when the leader had to take on additional teaching responsibilities. She emphasized the need to protect time for instructional coaching: "We need to think long term about ways for us to be flexible and yet not disruptive to our overall goals to support teachers. We never fall short of supporting kids; but when the schedule demands flexibility, I feel like we fall short of supporting teachers." As with time for looking at student work, protecting time for observations and coaching is a recurring challenge across the grantees. Instructional leaders will need to continually reassess how well current structures work as staffing changes occur.

Engaging in coaching conversations that include detailed, in-depth feedback is important for helping teachers develop action steps for future lessons.

Ideally, instructional leaders hold coaching conversations with teachers immediately following observations and have enough time to delve deeply into the feedback. One leader said she and the instructional coach purposely start small, focusing on specific skills with specific individuals rather than trying to tackle everything at once.

At this school, the instructional coach met with teachers after the observations to discuss feedback and come up with action steps for the next lesson. A teacher described her meetings with the coach:

> *"Every Tuesday, [my instructional coach] observes me, and then she sends me the notes, and we have 30 minutes to discuss what went wrong and what went right, and if I'm working towards my goal... Is this class reaching my goals? What should I change for this, for that? [My coach] is really good in instructions. A 30-minute meeting is like a 1-hour meeting, because she is so organized…Her advice [is] useful [to] me."*

Photo: Chelsea Opportunity Academy

Teachers said these coaching conversations added value to their instructional practices, for example by allowing them to step back and discuss if their lessons were hitting their classroom goals and by providing an opportunity to link their learning to teaching pedagogy.

> *In the past when I was observed and I got feedback it would be focused on student engagement and not student learning, and I think I get so much more feedback now on the student skills and outcomes. And not just feedback, I get advice, […] student engagement is great, but we want that to come with student learning, and I think that's just been a much bigger priority this year.*
>
> *– Teacher*

When providing feedback, instructional leaders should take into account individual teachers' needs and experiences.

Several leaders noted the importance of asking teachers how they thought the lesson went first and what they would like to discuss. As one noted, "Learning to invite teachers to first talk about what they felt, what they saw, what they want to process, and then inviting them to talk about the things you saw in a way that is … a little bit more purposeful so it doesn't always just feel like it's a critique."

This leader adjusted her feedback strategy to better meet a new teacher's needs. At the beginning of the year, the leader observed the teacher weekly, taking notes and setting goals for the following week. But being observed so formally made the teacher anxious, so the leader made the observations and feedback more casual by not sharing formal notes after each observation and narrowing it down to one goal for the following week.

Focusing observation feedback on the level of cognitive lift done by students provides teachers with a tangible way to think about increasing rigor. Both leaders and teachers consistently noted that instructional leaders' observations focused on helping teachers shift the cognitive lift to students, which they attributed to Springpoint coaching and the Springpoint protocol. A leader described what she looked for during observations:

> *"When I do observations, I am looking at what is the teacher doing, what is the student doing. Is there feedback? How is the teacher scaffolding, or are they over-scaffolding? What is the student doing? …is that a rigorous activity that the students are doing, or what level of rigor does the student engaging them, and what does the teacher lift? …Who is doing the heavy lifting?"*

> *I think, without realizing it, the way we designed our planning templates and our focus was on ensuring that teachers did a really good job, and yes, that's important, but we did a shift to really look at what students are producing daily, on a regular basis, how soon are they invited to start producing, what's the wait time before they get busy, and how is that going to change our rigor.*
>
> *– School Leader*

Paying attention to cognitive lift and student output also helped teachers stay focused on students and feel less critiqued during observations. One leader said it "helps teachers focus again. [They're] less judgmental on themselves and their curriculum..."

Photo: CREC Impact Academy

Promising Coaching Strategies for Improving Instruction

Instructional leaders and teachers reported specific strategies they learned through Springpoint coaching that helped them improve coaching and instruction:

- **Teacher as student:** The coach models teaching the lesson and the teacher acts as the student.

  "[W]e played student and I found that some of the teachers' most powerful lessons resulted from experiences where they did the assignment. So, we started this practice where I will ask teachers, whatever you assign that you are going to assess, do it yourself. That experience of being the student before you ask students to be the student, that was something that was super-effective and modeled."

- **"Praise, prompt, leave, and return"**: The coach encourages teachers to circulate, sit down to check in with a student, give immediate feedback, and promise to return in five minutes to check in on progress. This model ensures that students are working on the lesson and receiving feedback quickly.

- **Use of strong mini-lessons**: The coach works with a teacher to develop strong mini-lessons as a way to build the teachers' skills. Through the process of creating the mini-lessons, they identify specific indicators of success for certain teacher skills, including modeling a skill and strategy, checking for understanding through data, and ensuring students are learning the objectives.

Moving Forward

During the 2019–20 school year, grantees were building the foundations for stronger instructional systems. The ultimate goal is for the instructional tools and systems to be embedded within the cultures of these schools and to be able to withstand leadership and staff turnover.

As part of that work, Springpoint hoped to cultivate "anchor" teachers in grantee schools who successfully implemented TLEs and could model college and career ready instruction for the rest of the staff, and eventually scale TLEs throughout the school. Most grantees were successful in developing at least one anchor teacher and some were moving towards institutionalizing TLEs as a central component of their instructional approach.

The next phases of the work involves implementing TLEs more broadly among interested staff, aligning learning outcomes with competencies, and eventually developing a scope and sequence of TLE units such that TLEs make up the majority of students' learning time. At the same time, grantees will be working on other priorities including building up the primary person model and establishing or improving structures to support postsecondary planning.

Given the current pandemic impacting schools in 2020–21, it may be difficult for schools to push this agenda forward. Springpoint has revised its supports to meet the new contextual challenges, be it completely virtual instruction or a hybrid approach of remote and in-person instruction,

Photo: CREC Impact Academy

and it plans to provide opportunities for teachers to help build instructional capacity. The technical assistance will include planning with schools to meet both short- and long-term needs and goals, monthly coaching calls, professional development to build structures for case conferencing, and the adaptation or creation of remote TLEs for the virtual setting. Springpoint also has created a TLE fellows program in which teachers receive a stipend to develop new TLE units.

Focusing on instructional capacity building in 2019–20 was an intentional move to make sure all schools have the foundation necessary to improve students' learning experiences and outcomes. Through TLEs, well-defined competencies, and looking at student work practices, the initiative posits that teachers can operationalize the tenets of positive youth development—high expectations, engaging learning experiences, opportunities to contribute, caring and trusting relationships, and consistency—which are at the core of the ENE initiative. These building blocks will then position the grantees to further implement the systems and structures necessary to support students' success in and beyond high school.

Supporting Remote or Hybrid Instruction

The ongoing pandemic has created uncertainty for what instruction will look like in the near future. Many localities are beginning the school year with completely virtual instruction, while others are adopting a hybrid approach that includes both in-person instruction and virtual instruction. In either scenario, grantees will need to consider how to best support their students and build upon or at least maintain the hard work to improve instruction that they started during the 2019–20 school year.

At the time of the spring interviews, most schools were just beginning to close for in-person instruction and staff were grappling with how to support teaching and learning in a virtual environment. Most had made the pivot to remote instruction relatively seamlessly, though access to technology varied across grantees. They encountered some early challenges that speak to larger issues they may encounter with an extended virtual learning period:

- Engaging students remotely and ensuring they complete their coursework
- Coordinating students' schedules for virtual advisories or crew (given disrupted sleep, work, and childcare responsibilities)
- Navigating district-imposed limits on teachers' work time
- Balancing administrative or teaching duties with home responsibilities

Springpoint has developed a resource to support schools in effectively implementing remote and hybrid instruction. The guide includes a 'readiness checklist' across six areas of practice. Discrete recommendations and guiding questions—alongside coaching from Springpoint—can support schools in their planning efforts and elucidate where they need additional support.

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