

Leading for Equity: Lessons From the Equity Leadership Accelerator Program



Findings From AIR's Independent Evaluation of CLEE's SEED-Funded Initiative

Executive Summary

The **Equity Leadership Accelerator Program (ELAP)**, launched in 2023 by the Center for Leadership and Educational Equity (CLEE) with Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant support, is a 3-year initiative to strengthen equity-focused instructional leadership in Massachusetts. ELAP develops a leadership pipeline through coaching, mentoring, peer learning, and applied practice, supporting Early Career Principals (ECPs), Aspiring Principal Fellows (APFs), and Emerging Leader Fellows (ELFs).

The independent evaluation conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) draws on qualitative interviews with 20 ECP, APF, and ELF participants and six CLEE coach-facilitators; a focus group of five CLEE staff; and Core Leadership Practices self-assessment data. The study examines (a) improvements in equity-focused practices, (b) usefulness and quality of program components, and (c) factors influencing implementation.

Key Findings

Growth in Equity-Focused Leadership

- **Mindset Shifts:** Participants moved from viewing equity as an individual responsibility to understanding it as a shared, systemic commitment. They described deeper, more inclusive conceptions of equity and greater willingness to lead difficult conversations with staff.
- **Use of Data:** Participants reported increased reliance on disaggregated data and cycles of inquiry to identify opportunity gaps, monitor progress, and guide equity-centered decision making.
- **Preparedness to Lead:** Most participants rated themselves on a survey as *very well prepared* to lead equity work by Year 2, with none rating themselves as *unprepared*. Coach-facilitators confirmed observable growth in participants' readiness and practice.
- **Core Leadership Practices:** Participants' self-assessment data show consistent gains across all six domains (Setting Direction, Monitoring Progress, Building Capacity to Teach, Building Capacity to Collaborate, Building Capacity to Lead, and Reorganize Systems). Participants particularly emphasized growth in collaboration, data use, and systemic change.

Program Components Valued as High-Quality

- **Coaching and Mentoring:** Participants universally viewed this as the most impactful feature because it provided tailored guidance, accountability, and psychological safety. Mentors and coaches helped participants practice difficult conversations, lead equity initiatives, and reflect on their growth.
- **Resources and Protocols:** Participants highlighted ELAP's tools and literature as essential for addressing problems of practice and sustaining change.
- **Peer Learning and Networking:** Many participants said this was "the best part of the program" because these sessions fostered collaboration across districts, reduced isolation, and offered diverse perspectives.
- **Canvas Modules:** Participants' opinions were mixed on this component, with some valuing the convenience of centralized resources and others struggling with navigation and consistency.

Conditions Supporting and Limiting Engagement

- **Supports:** Participants valued the relational trust with coach-facilitators, alignment with their professional responsibilities, applied learning design, and responsive communication that sustained engagement.
- **Barriers:** Participants said there were time constraints, unclear expectations, Canvas usability challenges, and inconsistent peer session structures, which hindered deeper participation. Structural resistance to equity, staff pushback, and the emotional toll of leading in politically charged contexts also limited impact.
- **Enabling Conditions Identified by CLEE Staff:** Staff considered as critical leadership continuity, district stipends for release time, aligned internal planning, and midyear reflection points.
- **Implementation Barriers:** Participants said barriers included leadership turnover, uneven district engagement, voluntary participation, and perceived disconnects between ELAP activities and daily work.

Implications and Recommendations

1. Sustain coaching and mentoring as central features, with deliberate integration into school improvement work.
2. Clarify expectations and align structures, including better coherence with Massachusetts Performance Assessment for Leaders, to reduce duplication and increase relevance.
3. Streamline resources and technology, standardize Canvas modules, and simplify documentation to reduce overload.
4. Reinforce district and school leader buy-in to provide protected time, policy alignment, and sustained support for equity initiatives.

5. Foster community and peer collaboration to counter isolation and maintain momentum beyond the grant.
6. Plan for sustainability by securing ongoing funding and embedding ELAP practices within institutional systems.

Participants viewed ELAP as a transformative, equity-focused program that boosted their confidence, collaboration, and data-informed practices as leaders. While time constraints and political resistance limited its full impact, the coaching, mentoring, and practice-based learning helped prepare a new generation of equity-minded leaders.



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