



LEADING FOR EQUITY

Lessons From the Equity Leadership Accelerator Program

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Introduction

The Center for Leadership and Educational Equity (CLEE) launched the Equity Leader Accelerator Program (ELAP) in 2023 with support from a 3-year (2023–24 through 2025–26) U.S. Department of Education’s Supporting Effective Educator Development grant. Designed to strengthen equity-focused instructional leadership in Massachusetts public schools, ELAP aims to build the capacity of school-based leaders to advance equitable student outcomes through job-embedded professional learning, coaching, and collaboration. Grounded in CLEE’s Core Leadership Practices, ELAP supports leaders in developing and applying equity-centered leadership practices within their school contexts.

ELAP was implemented in two phases over 2 years. In Year 1 (2023–24), the program served Early Career Principals (ECPs)—principals and assistant principals in their first 5 years as school leaders—as the primary participants. Each ECP was paired with an Experienced Leader, a school or district leader with five or more years of experience, who served as a mentor. ECPs received job-embedded support through one-on-one coaching, in-district mentorship, asynchronous learning modules as well as peer learning and networking sessions designed to promote reflection, collaboration, and leadership practice improvement.

In Year 2 (2024–25), the same ECPs continued in the program but took on the role of mentors to two new groups of leaders: Aspiring Principal Fellows (APFs)—educators pursuing principal licensure—and Emerging Leader Fellows (ELFs), who are teacher leaders aspiring to formal leadership roles. ECPs deepened their leadership practice by mentoring these fellows while continuing to receive coaching and engage in the core components of ELAP, including networked learning, practice-based reflection, and access to online modules. This nested leadership structure created a developmental pipeline of equity-focused leaders while reinforcing the capacity of current principals to lead and mentor others.

This report presents findings from the independent descriptive evaluation of ELAP conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®), organized by the following research questions:

- To what extent do participants report improvements in practices that promote equity in student access to educational resources and opportunities?
- To what extent do participants find key components of ELAP to be useful and of high quality?
- What factors support or inhibit program implementation?

The report draws primarily on qualitative data, including interviews with 20 ELAP participants and six CLEE coach-facilitators as well as a focus group with five CLEE staff. The report incorporates Core Leadership Practices (CLPs) self-assessment data collected by CLEE in fall 2023 and spring 2025. ECPs rated themselves on a 1–5 scale—where 1 indicates *Ineffective/Inexperienced* and 5 indicates *Sustaining*—across practices and dispositions within each domain, and we present average scores for participants who completed both assessments to show changes over time. A detailed description of the study design, data sources, analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations is provided in the **Appendix**.



Findings

Drawing on interviews and focus groups, the sections that follow detail findings from the qualitative research into ELAP’s implementation. First, we examine how the program shaped participants’ capacity to promote equity, including shifts in mindset, leadership practices, and perceived readiness. Next, we explore the program components participants found most valuable—for example, coaching, mentoring, or collaborative learning—and how these contributed to their growth. Finally, we identify the conditions that supported or constrained participant engagement and offer insights to strengthen future implementation.



To what extent do participants report improvements in practices that promote equity in student access to educational resources and opportunities?

In this section, we examine the extent to which ECPs, APFs, and ELFs reported improvements in their practices that promote equitable access to educational resources and opportunities. Drawing on interview data and ECPs’ Core Leadership Practices self-assessment results, we explore how participants shifted from individual efforts to more collaborative, system-level, and data-informed approaches to equity. The section highlights changes in mindset and leadership practices, the application of the CLPs, key barriers participants encountered, and the supports they identified as essential for sustaining equity-focused work.

CLEE’S DEFINITION OF EQUITY LEADERSHIP

CLEE defines equity leadership through **six Core Leadership Practices**—a research-based framework that integrates mindset and action to disrupt inequities and build just, student-centered school systems. These include:

1. **Setting Direction:** Developing a shared understanding of inequities and creating a vision for equitable outcomes.

2. **Monitoring Progress:** Using data and cycles of inquiry to drive continuous improvement, especially for focal groups.
 3. **Building Capacity to Teach:** Supporting instructional improvement and cultivating ownership for equitable student learning.
 4. **Building Capacity to Collaborate:** Fostering inclusive, respectful adult learning and professional cultures.
 5. **Building Capacity to Lead:** Creating conditions for shared leadership and lifting silenced voices.
 6. **Reorganizing Systems:** Aligning structures, time, and resources to increase equity and access.
- These practices combine **dispositions** (equity-oriented beliefs) and **leadership actions** (observable practices) that collectively define what it means to lead for equity in schools.

To better promote equitable student access, ELAP participants reported shifting from individual actions to more collaborative, system-level, and data-informed leadership practices.

ELAP participants—ECPs, APFs, and ELFs—described a meaningful evolution from individual to system-level thinking because of their ELAP experience. While many entered the program with a strong personal commitment to equity, they described how ELAP helped them shift their perspective to consider how equity practices must be embedded across schoolwide structures and processes—and articulate more inclusive definitions of equity. One ECP shared:

I feel like we always thought about equity, but I feel like I have a deeper understanding of what that looks like and feels like. ... It's not about fair, it's about [being] equitable and giving everybody what they need. And I feel like that's a shift that I not only have made, but in Year 2 I feel a little more empowered to make with more stakeholders.

Through this shift in mindset, **participants also began embracing collective ownership of equity work.** Many acknowledged that they initially felt equity efforts were their sole responsibility but later recognized that progress requires shared leadership. An ECP reflected:

In my first year, I felt like a lot of the responsibility for ensuring equitable outcomes rested with administration. ... [But] I found that there are people in the building who had goals that were aligned with equity. ... [So] the shift in my thinking was, "I don't have to do it all—that's great because I can't do it all."

ELAP participants reported having more confidence to address inequity, particularly when confronting adult behaviors or practices that misaligned with equity values. For example, one ELF described leading a professional development (PD) session focused on how students are discussed in meetings, only to be surprised by staff pushback:

A lot of people [were] saying, “We do not need to change the way we’re doing things. ... The way that kids are spoken about behind closed doors ... is kind of inconsequential.” ... I assumed everybody would agree with my perspective. ... So that was definitely eye-opening.

In response to experiences like this, participants credited ELAP with helping them name their values, have uncomfortable conversations, and hold colleagues accountable. One ECP shared:

There were people in leadership who were not behaving equitably ... that was something I was really afraid to do ... but CLEE gave me sort of this platform and validation.

Another ECP added:

I feel a lot less afraid just by virtue of me feeling more comfortable with people not liking me; frankly, they’re at the very least hearing it.

Finally, **participants described becoming more deliberate in how they used data to identify and address inequities.** Several noted shifting from relying on intuition or broad assumptions to using disaggregated student data to pinpoint opportunity gaps, track progress over time, and inform targeted actions. For example, one ELF recalled:

It was not a secret that certain populations of students did not achieve at the same levels. ... I didn’t realize how drastically different the results were for [some student groups], even more so than any other population of students.

Others emphasized the importance of engaging in multiple data cycles—regular intervals in which teams collected, analyzed, and revisited disaggregated performance and engagement metrics—to monitor whether changes were closing gaps and to adjust strategies accordingly. As one APF shared:

It’s always going to be a continuous cycle—and being able to back those claims up with numbers is a really powerful way to ensure equity.

Participants grew increasingly prepared to lead equity-focused work.

In interviews, ELAP participants were asked to rate how well the program prepared them to advance equity using a sliding 5-point scale. A rating between 1 and 2 was defined as not prepared; 3 as well prepared (indicating growth in mindset and practice while still developing experience or navigating role constraints); between 4 and 5 as very well prepared (reflecting strong confidence and active engagement in equity leadership). **A few ELAP participants rated**

themselves as between 3 and 4, while most rated themselves between 4 and 5. Notably, no participants rated themselves between 1 or 2.

ECPs typically rated themselves between 4 and 5, and saw ELAP as laying a strong foundation for equity leadership. They valued the frameworks, collaboration, and external perspective, with one person noting it was “good to have a thought partner who was not necessarily a person in [their] district.” **APFs also most often rated themselves between 4 or 5.** One shared:

I feel like [ELAP] has given me all the tools ... [so] between a 4 and a 5.

Another described feeling “empowered and equipped to confidently have a conversation ... to explain equity,” crediting the program for deepening reflection and intention in their work.

ELFs—teacher leaders exploring leadership roles—rated themselves across the 3 to 5 range, depending on their opportunity to apply ELAP learning. One ELF described using data and facilitating PD to shift staff perceptions. Another ELF, who self-rated as 3.5, reflected that ELAP showed them “what it feels like to be able to make that change on a large scale.”

CLEE coach-facilitators responded to a similar question and offered external perspectives that generally aligned with participant self-assessments. They often **highlighted observable shifts in participant practice and preparedness.** One noted that participants were “much more prepared [for equity-focused leadership] ... a lot of them already had an equity focus, but they didn’t really have the skills or the tools to be able to do it.” Others described participants becoming more nuanced and strategic in how they used equity-focused data—moving beyond “just carving out 15 minutes in a staff meeting” to lead more sustained, meaningful reflection and planning. Similarly, CLEE coach-facilitators also observed participants stepping into broader leadership roles, becoming “much more vocal ... not only in their own school ... but at the district level,” and encouraging colleagues to examine day-to-day practices that may unintentionally reinforce inequities.

Interview responses suggest that ELAP strengthened participants’ readiness to lead for equity by equipping them with practical tools—such as data dig protocols, probing questions, root cause analysis—and structured opportunities to apply them. Participants described how activities like analyzing disaggregated data, facilitating PD sessions, role-playing equity conversations, and working in nonjudgmental spaces built both confidence and skill. Coach-facilitators noted that repeated cycles of application, reflection, and adjustments moved participants from brief discussions to sustained, actionable equity work. Reflecting on this progress, **no participant or coach-facilitator described participants as unprepared; instead, both groups pointed to concrete actions and observable growth.**

EQUITY IN PRACTICE: JANE'S LEADERSHIP JOURNEY THROUGH ELAP

Jane (a pseudonym) entered ELAP with a foundational understanding of equity and a desire to deepen her leadership practice.

At my school, we had used that image of “equal vs. equitable” with teachers—understanding that equal doesn’t always mean equitable. We have to meet kids where they are and give them the support they need. My hope was that ELAP would give me more tools, especially knowing that we face real constraints—limited time, limited funding. I wanted to learn from my coach and from other leaders in my district and beyond, through networking, to get ideas and strategies for how to stretch resources and better support students.

Through ELAP, Jane found what she was seeking through grounding her equity work in daily practice and challenging her thinking through individualized support. She highlighted two components as especially impactful: one-on-one coaching sessions and her in-district mentor, another school leader who helped her reflect on equity within real district initiatives.

The program’s structure also stood out from past PD experiences. Rather than “quick hit” sessions, Jane noted that ELAP provided ongoing, job-embedded support tailored to her context:

I really liked having the one-on-one coaching. In a group, sometimes you feel like, “I don’t know if I should say that or ask that—now’s not the time.” With my coach, I felt comfortable having those conversations.

In her interview, Jane described how ELAP helped shift and sharpen her leadership lens. While she had previously talked about equity in general terms, she developed a deeper understanding of what it looks and feels like in practice. She moved beyond conversations about fairness to focus on meeting individual needs—and, in her second year, she felt more empowered to lead that shift alongside staff, families, and the broader community.

Jane’s growth was also reflected in her CLP self-assessment. At the end of Year 1, she rated herself primarily as *Prepared/Proficient* across the six CLP domains, indicating she was applying leadership strategies purposefully and leading teams in ways that positively impacted schoolwide outcomes. By Year 2, she rated herself as *Accomplished* across almost all domains—reflecting her shift to not only leading schoolwide efforts but also continuously assessing and refining her approach for greater impact. Her largest gains were in the domains of **Monitoring Progress, Building Capacity to Teach, and Building Capacity to Collaborate**.

Jane’s growth mirrors a broader shift seen across ELAP participants. As her coach reflected:

We’re asking people to take on a different lens as they do the same kind of work. ...
We’re helping people reflect—and then turn those reflections into action.

By the end of her second year, Jane’s confidence as an equity leader had deepened and were now rooted by practical tools, stronger collaboration, and the consistent guidance of her coach-facilitator and mentor. She no longer viewed equity as a static concept, but as a dynamic, ongoing practice embedded in every facet of school leadership. When asked how well ELAP prepared her to lead this work, she did not hesitate:

I feel very prepared—a 5 [out of 5], ... I feel more confident in my ability to make a change because I have more tools and more knowledge.

ELAP participants applied core leadership practices that promoted more equitable student access to resources and opportunities.

Across interviews, ELAP participants reflected on how their understanding and application of CLPs deepened over time. **Many described how the practices had become internalized, serving as a reflective framework for their leadership growth.** As one ECP explained:

I feel so much more confident in where I am this year than where I was last year ... just growing as a leader through the program.

Another participant described using CLEE’s CLP rubric—a tool that outlines the six Core Leadership Practices and describes progression from emerging to sustaining proficiency—as a reflective tool, explaining that it helped them ask, “Did I actually demonstrate this particular core leadership practice?”

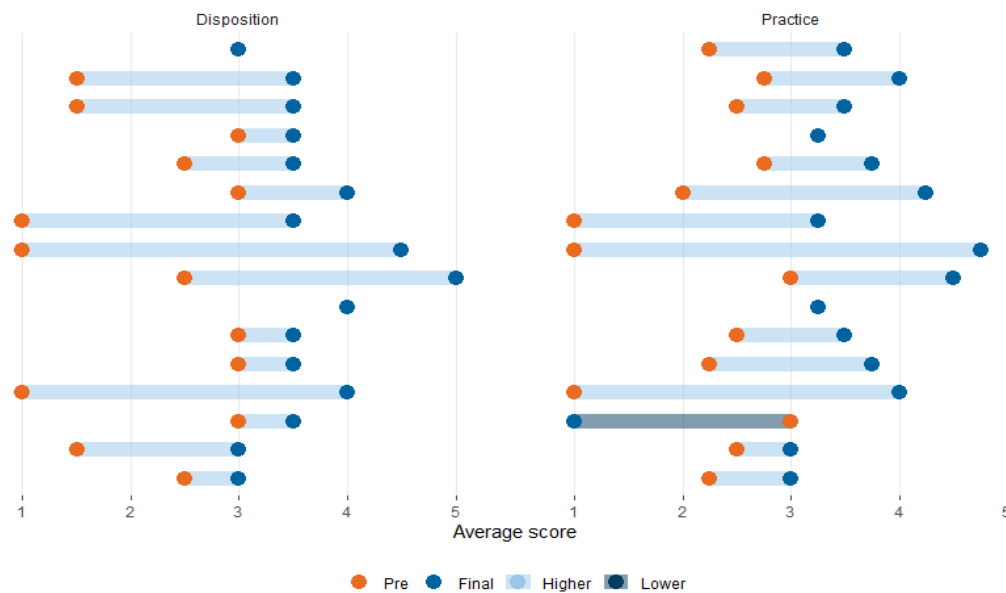
Participants across roles described applying the CLPs to support equitable outcomes for their focal student groups, which are students they identified as historically underserved in their school contexts, including multilingual learners, students with disabilities, or those not meeting grade-level expectations. While the six domains often intersected in practice, **Monitoring Progress, Building Capacity to Collaborate, and Reorganizing Systems** were most frequently cited. The examples that follow illustrate how participants operationalized the CLPs in their day-to-day work to advance equity.

Exhibits 1 through 6 complement these examples by showing changes in ECPs’ self-assessment ratings over time. Using CLEE’s CLP rubric, ECPs rated themselves on a scale from 1 (*Ineffective or Inexperienced*) to 5 (*Sustaining*) for each item in the six leadership domains. These ratings reflect how confident participants felt in applying specific leadership dispositions (e.g., beliefs and mindsets) and practices (e.g., actions and behaviors) in their school contexts. Each domain includes both dispositions and practices. The exhibits display average scores across the 16 ECPs who completed the self-assessment at both the preassessment (fall 2023) and final assessment (spring 2025) time points. “Higher” indicates an increase in average score, “lower” reflects a decrease, and a single dot means the average score remained the same. While self-reported, these shifts provide insight into how participants internalized and applied the CLP framework over time.

Setting Direction

The **Setting Direction** domain centers on a leader’s ability to articulate a compelling, equity-focused vision and align their team’s efforts toward shared goals. Although this domain was referenced less frequently than others in interviews, CLP self-assessment data suggest growth in both mindset and practice over the course of the program (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Changes in Early Career Principals' Self-Reported Dispositions and Practices in Setting Direction



Note. Core Leadership Practices Self-Assessment ($n = 16$). Each row of connected dots represents an Early Career Principal (ECP) who completed the assessment. Connected dots that are light blue indicate ECP's average self-ratings were *higher* after participating in Equity Leader Accelerator Program (ELAP), and connected dots that are gray indicate an ECP's average self-ratings were *lower* after participating in ELAP. A single dot indicates the ECP's average score remained the same before and after participating in ELAP.

On average, ECPs reported an increase from 2.31 to 3.66 in the **Setting Direction** domain and from 2.33 to 3.52 in related leadership practices. These gains suggest that ELAP helped participants strengthen their ability to clarify purpose, set intentional goals, and guide their school communities toward more equitable outcomes. The findings reflect not only shifts in mindset but also increased readiness to lead with intentionality in this domain.

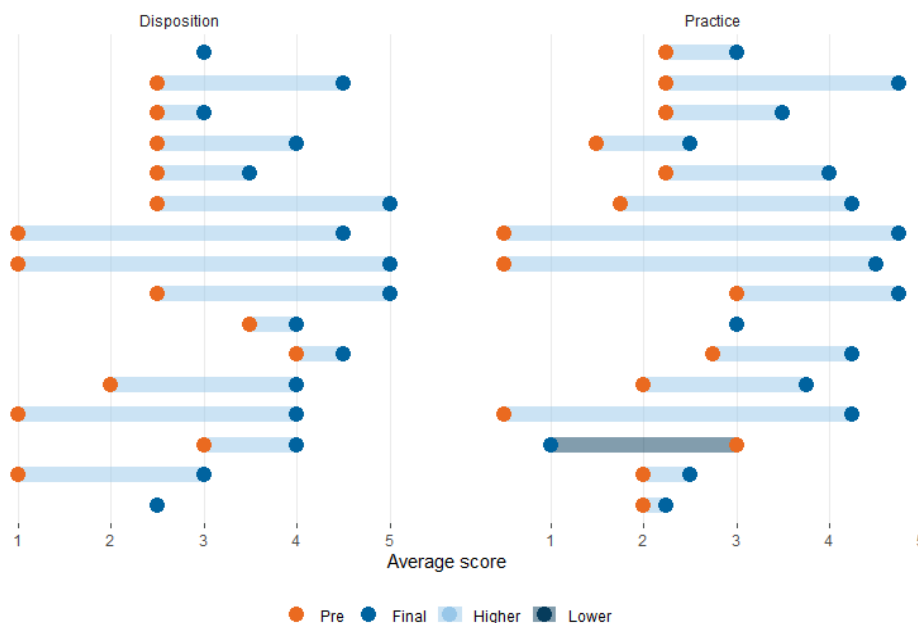
While not widely discussed in interviews, those who described applying this domain emphasized the challenge and importance of building a shared vision and aligning efforts toward equity. As one ECP reflected:

Setting Direction was really important because I felt like I had a vision, but I ... wasn't getting there. So that one is something that I'm a lot more conscious about in terms of what the vision is. ... How do we all jump on board, but also how are we going to get there?

Monitoring Progress

The **Monitoring Progress** domain emphasizes leaders' use of data and evidence to drive continuous improvement, assess equity-focused outcomes, and inform schoolwide decision making. Across interviews, this domain was one of the most frequently referenced, with many participants describing how ELAP strengthened their ability to collect, analyze, and act on data in ways that promoted more equitable learning environments. CLP self-assessment data reinforce these reflections, showing growth in both self-reported dispositions and leadership practices related to this domain (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2. Changes in Early Career Principals' Self-Reported Dispositions and Practices in Monitoring Progress



Note. Core Leadership Practices Self-Assessment ($n = 16$). Each row of connected dots represents an Early Career Principal (ECP) who completed the assessment. Connected dots that are light blue indicate ECP's average self-ratings were *higher* after participating in Equity Leader Accelerator Program (ELAP), and connected dots that are gray indicate an ECP's average self-ratings were *lower* after participating in ELAP. A single dot indicates the ECP's average score remained the same before and after participating in ELAP.

On average, ECPs reported an increase from 2.31 to 3.97 in the **Monitoring Progress** domain and from 1.97 to 3.56 in related practices. These shifts suggest that ELAP helped participants build stronger habits of inquiry and develop greater confidence in using data to guide and assess their equity work. Growth in practices indicate that ECPs increasingly translated their equity mindsets into concrete, data-informed actions by the end of the program.

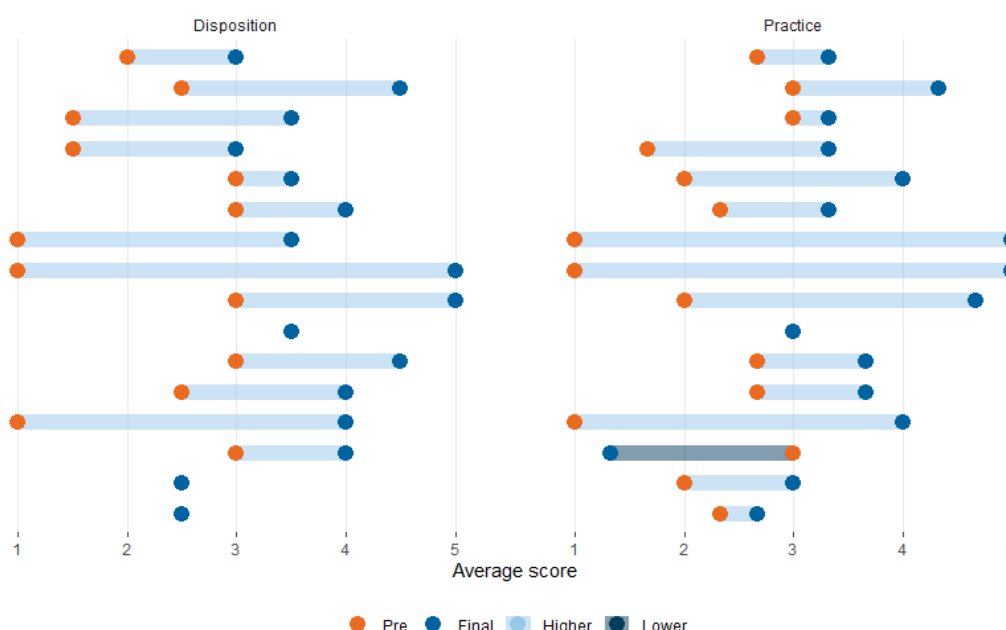
These quantitative gains are echoed in interview reflections, which offer a closer look at how participants used data to monitor progress and drive equity-centered change in their school contexts. Most ELAP participants reported implementing this domain through cycles of inquiry and equity-focused data use. For example, one ELF analyzed multiple years of student assessment data—including statewide and formative assessments—to understand why their focal student group was not showing significant improvement in English language arts. This inquiry informed their goal of increasing access to culturally relevant texts. This ELF collaborated with teachers to improve classroom libraries, where existing collections either lacked diverse representation or were outdated and in poor condition, so students could see themselves in the texts available to them. Another ELF described a schoolwide effort to strengthen data literacy among staff:

Our equity focus project was to build data literacy within my school ... using the Data Wise process and really bringing that to all of our teachers ... to learn to look at student data without making it personal. ... We've realized that our first step was learning how to look at data objectively using protocols. ... We've slowly, throughout the course of the year, been building the literacy, but also the comfort with discussing student data and using it to improve student outcomes.

Building Capacity to Teach

The **Building Capacity to Teach** domain focuses on leaders' ability to support instructional improvement through professional learning, reflective practice, and strategies that advance equitable teaching. CLP self-assessment data indicate growth in this area, with ECPs reporting an average increase from 2.28 to 3.75 in the **Building Capacity to Teach** domain, and from 2.21 to 3.60 in related practices (Exhibit 3). These increases suggest that participants not only deepened their belief in the importance of equity-focused instructional leadership but also strengthened their capacity to take action in support of it.

Exhibit 3. Changes in Early Career Principals' Self-Reported Dispositions and Practices in Building Capacity to Teach



Note. Core Leadership Practices Self-Assessment ($n = 16$). Each row of connected dots represents an Early Career Principal (ECP) who completed the assessment. Connected dots that are light blue indicate ECP's average self-ratings were *higher* after participating in Equity Leader Accelerator Program (ELAP), and connected dots that are gray indicate an ECP's average self-ratings were *lower* after participating in ELAP. A single dot indicates the ECP's average score remained the same before and after participating in ELAP.

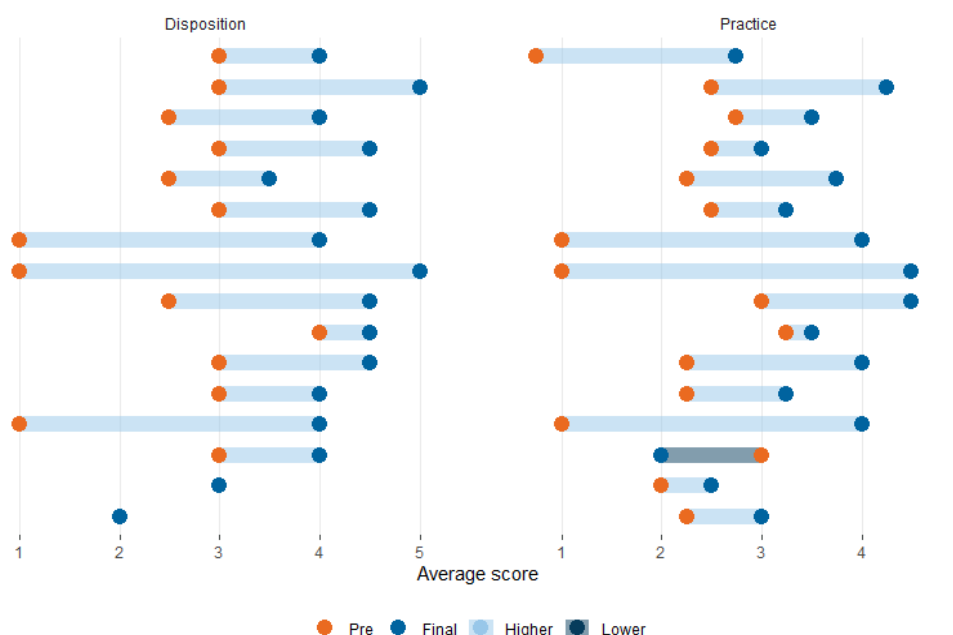
Interview reflections echoed these trends. Some ELAP participants reported **Building Capacity to Teach** by leading PD sessions on culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy and applying tools like equity walks to identify and address gaps in inclusive practice. One ELF shared how their team used insights from an equity walk to adjust instruction and classroom environments so that all learners, including students with disabilities, felt visible and valued. Another ELF collaborated with colleagues to improve students' writing by identifying an instructional need—using evidence to support claims—and codeveloping a cross-disciplinary plan to strengthen that skill for both focal students and the broader student population, further illustrating how ELAP participants used data, collaboration, and reflective tools to enhance equitable teaching practices across classrooms.

Building Capacity to Collaborate

The **Building Capacity to Collaborate** domain highlights a leader's role in fostering shared responsibility, building trust, and facilitating cross-role and cross-department collaboration in

service of equity. This was one of the most widely discussed domains in participant interviews, and CLP self-assessment data reflect strong growth in this area (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4. Changes in Early Career Principals' Self-Reported Dispositions and Practices in Building Capacity to Collaborate



Note. Core Leadership Practices Self-Assessment ($n = 16$). Each row of connected dots represents an Early Career Principal (ECP) who completed the assessment. Connected dots that are light blue indicate ECP's average self-ratings were *higher* after participating in Equity Leader Accelerator Program (ELAP), and connected dots that are gray indicate an ECP's average self-ratings were *lower* after participating in ELAP. A single dot indicates the ECP's average score remained the same before and after participating in ELAP.

On average, ECPs reported an increase from 2.53 to 4.06 in the **Building Capacity to Collaborate** domain, and from 2.14 to 3.48 in related practices. These gains suggest that ELAP helped participants not only value collaborative leadership more deeply but also build the confidence and skills to engage colleagues in equity-focused inquiry and planning.

Several ELAP participants interviewed reported growth in the **Building Capacity to Collaborate** domain, describing how they facilitated new partnerships across roles and departments to improve outcomes for their focal student groups. To illustrate, one APF described how ELAP enabled cross-disciplinary collaboration that had not been possible before. This APF said:

I'm a [specials] teacher—and in my role as an ELAP participant, I was able to collaborate with grade-level teacher classrooms in a way that I wouldn't have been able to do

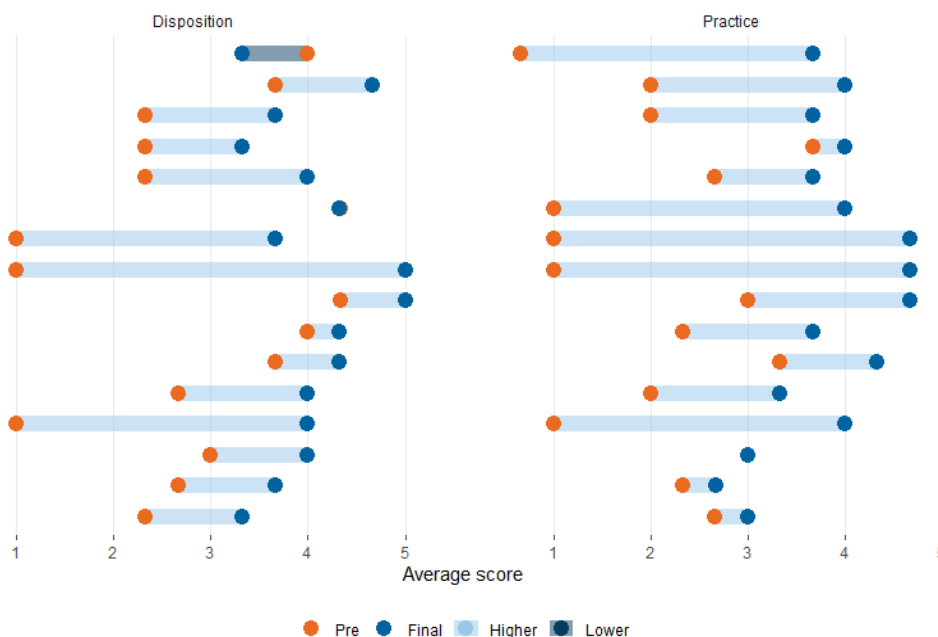
[before]. ... Being able to bring my developing leadership skills in combination with my colleagues' instructional skills was a really incredible way for us to work together ... and support the children in my focal group.

Additionally, one ECP reported collaborating with teachers, curriculum leaders, and multilingual learner specialists to revise their main schedule and codesign a more inclusive model for serving multilingual students. Similarly, an ELF described bringing colleagues together to reflect on how to modify a writing assignment to better support students with an individualized education program, fostering shared responsibility for equitable instruction and reinforcing how participants built collective ownership of equity goals through collaborative planning and inquiry.

Building Capacity to Lead

The **Building Capacity to Lead** domain focuses on leaders' ability to model courageous leadership, empower others, and create environments in which shared leadership and accountability for equity can thrive. Although fewer participants discussed this domain in interviews compared with other domains, those who did offered rich examples of how they began to take more visible leadership roles and support others in doing the same (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5. Changes in Early Career Principals' Self-Reported Dispositions and Practices in Building Capacity to Lead



Note. Core Leadership Practices Self-Assessment ($n = 16$). Each row of connected dots represents an Early Career Principal (ECP) who completed the assessment. Connected dots that are light blue indicate ECP's average self-ratings were *higher* after participating in Equity Leader Accelerator Program (ELAP), and connected dots that are gray indicate an ECP's average self-ratings were *lower* after participating in ELAP. A single dot indicates the ECP's average score remained the same before and after participating in ELAP.

As shown in Exhibit 5, most ECPs reported growth in this domain. On average, ECPs reported an increase from 2.79 to 4.04 in the **Building Capacity to Lead** domain, and from 2.10 to 3.81 in related practices. These shifts indicate that ELAP supported ECPs in developing both the confidence and capacity to lead equity work—particularly by modeling reflective leadership, facilitating difficult conversations, and creating space for teacher leadership.

The **Building Capacity to Lead** domain was less frequently cited than other domains, but it surfaced in powerful examples, primarily among ECPs who modeled leadership behaviors and empowered peers to lead. One ECP described engaging colleagues in peer-to-peer equity leadership by initiating courageous conversations about school culture and addressing resistance among staff. The participant said:

There are some people in the building ... who are very interested in equity ... really being someone that they can come and talk to. ... What I'm starting to do is have conversations with them about the conversations that they're going to be having with their colleagues. ... We need to really be starting to address our school culture and particularly our school's discomfort with conflict. ... I have to be more comfortable with conflict myself to model for them how to do it.

Other ECPs described identifying opportunities for teachers to lead, such as facilitating PD or sharing perspectives in team meetings. One ECP explained:

That's something that I'm really passionate about. ... I think that's the shift I want to make. ... I want to empower more leadership in our building.

In contrast, two ELAP participants reported limited opportunities to translate their learning into broader leadership efforts. One APF described struggling to implement authentic equity experiences from restricted access to students and staff and a lack of formal decision-making power. One ELF shared:

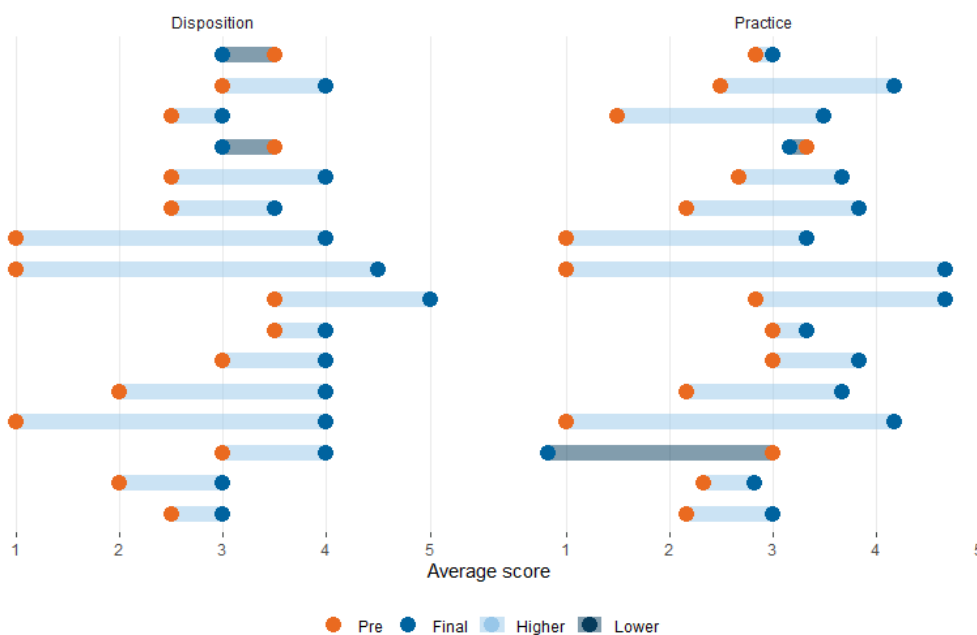
I don't feel like I have the influence ... to even carry my learning over.

These reflections underscore how participants' roles shaped their ability to lead others toward equity goals.

Reorganizing Systems

In the **Reorganizing Systems** domain, ELAP supported leaders in recognizing how school structures, policies, and routines can either perpetuate or interrupt inequity. Participants began to see themselves as systems-level change agents with the responsibility and ability to shift conditions for their focal student groups (Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6. Changes in Early Career Principals' Self-Reported Dispositions and Practices in Reorganizing Systems



Note. Core Leadership Practices Self-Assessment ($n = 16$). Each row of connected dots represents an Early Career Principal (ECP) who completed the assessment. Connected dots that are light blue indicate ECP's average self-ratings were *higher* after participating in Equity Leader Accelerator Program (ELAP), and connected dots that are gray indicate an ECP's average self-ratings were *lower* after participating in ELAP. A single dot indicates the ECP's average score remained the same before and after participating in ELAP.

Self-assessment data reflects this shift. As illustrated in Exhibit 6, ECPs, on average, reported an increase from 2.50 to 3.75 in the **Reorganizing Systems** domain, and from 2.28 to 3.48 in related practices. These increases indicate stronger confidence in their roles as equity-oriented leaders and greater readiness to apply systemic changes in practice.

Interview data illustrated how ELAP participants across roles operationalized the **Reorganizing Systems** domain by redesigning structures, routines, and processes to create more equitable conditions for their focal student groups. In several interviews, participants described using data, shared leadership, and continuous improvement strategies to challenge inequities embedded in school systems. One ECP recounted leading a collaborative revision of the

school's main schedule by forming a teacher committee to ensure multilingual learners had greater access to appropriate support. In a different example, an ELF shared efforts to revamp the Student Support Team (SST) process to better address both academic and nonacademic needs, emphasizing the role of data in guiding decisions and monitoring progress. Others reported using data to spark critical reflection, such as an ELF who presented disaggregated referral data to raise staff awareness about the over-referral of specific student groups. In yet another example, one APF explained how they used the continuous improvement planning cycle to “continuously reflect and make adjustments ... on what [they’re] doing and how [they’re] helping that focal group.” These examples from interviews underscore how participants used ELAP tools and practices to identify and disrupt inequitable systems.

ELAP participants faced ongoing barriers that limited the depth and reach of their efforts to promote equity.

A common theme across interviews was resistance from colleagues, often rooted in entrenched school cultures and longstanding beliefs about teaching and learning. Some participants described pushbacks from staff, particularly when serving newcomer students or attempting to shift instructional mindsets. For example, one APF described a dramatic demographic shift in their school with the arrival of refugee families into the community, which upended the school's historically homogenous population in terms of race and socioeconomic status of its students and families. While newer staff adapted readily, veteran educators—many with decades of experience—found the transition more difficult. “Our school had never even had [multilingual learners],” the APF participant noted, so the shift was met with “a lot of resistance,” particularly from staff who believed that the goal should be to “teach children to assimilate” rather than meet students where they were and provide the scaffolds they needed to thrive.

Similarly, one ECP reflected on the difficulty of encouraging colleagues to engage in PD around inclusive and equitable practices, noting that some staff expressed skepticism about the value of such efforts. These reactions—including resistance to equity-focused learning, support for more punitive approaches to student misconduct, and a tendency to challenge students’ perspectives on race or identity—made it difficult to build shared momentum. This ECP said:

I know that maybe two-thirds in the room would be willing ... but they’re terrified of the other third. ... I don’t yet trust that we would be moving in a direction that isn’t backwards.

In addition to cultural resistance, ELAP participants encountered structural barriers—most notably, limited time to engage in equity work. One ELF noted:

A challenge is finding time ... to work with my colleagues since we do not have a common planning time.

Participants described squeezing in equity-related efforts after school hours or during lunch or recess. Another ELF explained:

We do designate time, however things come up ... where the time we did designate gets eaten up by other things that take higher priority.

A third ELF reflected on how time pressures contributed to staff hesitation, noting that colleagues were “at capacity” and felt “uncomfortable” when expected to take on new responsibilities or change existing routines. To address this, this participant worked with administrators to repurpose existing time, explaining:

If we’re adding something, we’re taking something else away. ... It’s not additional work.

Beyond structural and cultural barriers, **ELAP participants described the emotional strain of leading equity work in politically charged contexts.** For some, the toll was especially acute in response to recent immigration enforcement and its impact on students. One APF recalled comforting two siblings whose apartment building had been raided that morning by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), emphasizing the urgency of ensuring that students and families feel safe at school amid external threats. An ELF described similar emotional weight, sharing that seeing ICE vehicles in town triggered fears of being targeted for their social justice advocacy. Rather than retreat, they described a deepened resolve. One ELF said:

I think I strive more deeply into social justice. ... I think it’s never-ending work.

ELAP participants also reflected on a broader climate of fear and anxiety within schools. One ECP noted that “there’s a tremendous amount of anxiety ... felt by many educators,” particularly around the future of equity work. An ELF feared losing their diversity programs, which is central to their professional identity, and described being more cautious when addressing race and equity in class. These reflections underscore how the emotional toll of equity leadership is heightened by political volatility, funding uncertainty, and a deep sense of responsibility to protect students.

CLEE’s response to its own funding challenges became a powerful source of affirmation for ELAP participants. One ELF said:

When we found out the news that CLEE had lost some funding ... it kind of hit home. ... I felt honestly really inspired and empowered the way [CLEE] said, “Okay, we’re going to

carry on. We're still going to have classes. We're going to keep you updated about what's going on." I was really impressed with how they respond[ed]. ... It just speaks to their program and how important it is ... standing up and saying—advocating for what's important.

Amid a climate of political tension and funding uncertainty, CLEE's commitment to equity served as a powerful source of affirmation and emotional grounding for ELAP participants. One ELF described the relief of learning that the program would continue, saying:

I was freaking out like, hey, how is this going to work? I want to finish this. I don't want to stop. ... It was a pleasant surprise that they continued.

For others, ELAP's greatest impact was the collective strength it offered in the face of overwhelming challenges. One ELAP explained:

There are other people who care about this and that the work we did together is going to make a difference. ... Having others in this with me is what doesn't keep me from saying, okay, I'm defeated.

Participants described the need for sustained coaching and community and institutional support to advance equitable student access to resources and opportunities.

To carry the momentum of their learning, ELAP participants emphasized the critical need for continued support beyond the formal program period. A primary theme that emerged was the value of **ongoing coaching and implementation support** from CLEE or their institutions. Participants emphasized that regular check-ins, structured opportunities to revisit goals, and targeted guidance would help them sustain their equity efforts amid competing demands. Several noted the importance of receiving concrete tools and protocols for equity-centered facilitation and the time to reflect on data and plan next steps. One ECP shared:

I'd love a once-in-a-while check-in from my coach. ... That would help me if I was having a challenge.

An ELF similarly emphasized the importance of accountability and data-driven reflection, explaining that regular check-ins help carve out time to assess progress toward equity goals. The participant stated:

We need to do a deep dive to look at the MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] scores. ... Can we see any improvement?

Another ELF described how the continued presence of CLEE offered critical reassurance and practical support for sustaining equity leadership:

As long as they're there and I know that they're there—available and they're not caving into pressure to close or ... not continuing their work—I think our work will continue. My work specifically will be ... easier to continue with them being there, knowing that I can turn back and say, “Oh, I need some suggestions on how to approach this.” ... If I know that I have that backing from [CLEE], I think my work will be much easier going forward.

Along with the desire for check-ins, respondents also emphasized the importance of **maintaining connection with peers** who could offer encouragement and accountability. Participants described how relationships formed through ELAP helped them feel less isolated in their equity leadership. These peer ties served as both a source of emotional grounding and practical encouragement. One participant reflected:

I've met a couple of great participants through [ELAP]. ... [They] have a very similar [teaching] experience as I do, and we seem to be on the same page a lot. I think [they are] going to be my biggest support moving forward. ... We [can] keep each other in check and be like, “No, you are doing the right thing. This is what we were meant to do.” ... “This is how we're going to move forward.” That is my biggest takeaway from [ELAP].

In addition to peer and programmatic support, participants suggested that **district and school leader buy-in** is also essential to sustaining equity efforts beyond the duration of ELAP. Some participants expressed concerns that while equity was featured in strategic plans and public messaging, its implementation often felt superficial or performative, highlighting a gap between stated commitments and meaningful, school-level practice. As one ECP shared:

On our strategic plan ... we say [equity work] is something we're doing, but what does that look like in a specific building? What does that look like in a classroom? That piece is kind of missing. It's like this up here thing that we say that we're doing, but it's like how are we ensuring that that's happening at every level?

Nevertheless, some participants felt fortunate to be in environments in which district and school leaders demonstrated visible, ongoing commitments to equity:

I feel really supported by my principal and the district. And I appreciate and continue to need that. It's not like [district and school leaders] putting out a statement saying, “We care about that.” When your superintendent is emailing the school leaders personally [about equity work], you can tell ... that really matters. ... When difficult conversations happen, it's never easy, but you can stand on your values and what you've learned.

One ECP spoke directly to the need for courageous, values-driven leadership, especially in the current political climate:

It starts from the top up. So having administration that is committed to this work, even in the face of directives to stop.

An ELF emphasized the importance of engaging district leadership in ongoing dialogue about equity's impact, sharing:

Our assistant superintendent [and I] had this conversation. "This is my lens and where I would like to go." Just being able to have those conversations about what [equity] looks like and what the impact is for students [helps me sustain this work].

Finally, ELAP participants underscored the ongoing **challenge of securing sufficient funding to sustain equity work**. They described how local funding mechanisms, such as property taxes or town-based budgets, can limit district capacity to retain key staff or continue professional learning initiatives. One ELF explained:

It comes down to funding. ... We've been back and forth and back and forth with both of our towns. ... Money is always a challenge.

Another expressed concern about losing culturally and linguistically responsive training from potential cuts:

If we don't have that grant anymore, we don't have them [coaches] anymore. ... I just really feel like the work will die off because we won't have those coaches.

Participants highlighted how such cuts often impact the very programs and educators most essential to advancing equity. As one ELF noted, budget reductions disproportionately affected "young, motivated, student-centered ... compassionate teachers," who are the same individuals who "lead the charge in caring for kids" and model inclusive practices for peers.

LESSONS LEARNED IN COACHING AND FACILITATION

CLEE coach-facilitators described how their practices shifted toward more responsive, relationship-centered facilitation over time. They learned to balance clear structure with flexibility, creating space for reflection, connection, and individualized support.

They underscored the value of being clear about program goals and expectations from the outset. One coach-facilitator reflected:

It's important to set direction ... so people understand where they're going and have realistic expectations of their commitment and contribution to the program.

At the same time, coach-facilitators highlighted the need to adjust in real time. As one coach-facilitator said:

Being well prepared ... doesn't mean not being flexible. ... [It means] being flexible enough to step away from the agenda, to give time for the participants to gain meaning.

Another added:

We have to provide space within our agendas ... to help [participants] slow down. But it has to be the right balance ... so that there's still a fire to keep the work moving.

CLEE coach-facilitators also saw “slowing down” as essential to fostering deeper reflection.

Many described moving away from a default problem-solving mindset to create space for inquiry. As one coach-facilitator put it:

Our environments in schools, it's all about solutions. ... We have to cue ourselves to slow down.

Another noted:

I've learned to ask questions. I've learned not to tell so much and solve people's problems.

Relationship-building remained central to their work. CLEE coach-facilitators described consistent, personalized outreach between sessions and at key moments as crucial for participant engagement. As one coach-facilitator said:

Building relationships with [participants] ... the in-between sessions, the check-ins, the emails, just saying, “Hey, thinking about you, feel free to contact me if you need support.” ... Building positive relationships [was key for me as a coach-facilitator].

Meeting participants where they are academically, emotionally, and professionally required coach-facilitators to shift their own expectations. Several CLEE coach-facilitators described letting go of rigid standards and instead supporting incremental progress. For example, one coach-facilitator said:

I am letting ... the participant take the lead, and I am nudging and poking to just help [them] get to a slightly better direction.

CLEE coach-facilitators also discussed the importance of adjusting their support based on each participant's readiness. One coach-facilitator said:

Expecting that they have deep data knowledge on day one is not realistic There are people that need additional support in that work.

CLEE coach-facilitators worked to reduce both cognitive and procedural barriers that might prevent participants from fully engaging. Some CLEE coach-facilitators reported that they focused on making language and concepts more approachable to participants. As one shared:

[We] try to lower that learning curve a little bit by being less committed to some of our jargon and being a little bit clearer with our language.

Moreover, coach-facilitators noted streamlining processes that had previously caused confusion by reviewing tools step by step with participants and completing documentation collaboratively to improve clarity and follow-through.



To what extent do participants find key components of ELAP to be useful and of high quality?

Participants across roles overwhelmingly described ELAP as a meaningful, relevant, and transformative professional learning experience that strengthened both their leadership capacity and equity-focused practice. This section examines participants' perceptions of the program's core components—coaching, mentorship, asynchronous learning modules, and collaborative peer structures—and how each contributed to their professional growth. It explores which elements participants found most useful, why they were effective (or, in some cases, not effective), and how they were applied in real school contexts. Drawing on perspectives from both ELAP participants and CLEE coach-facilitators, the following findings highlight multiple dimensions of the program's usefulness, including shifts in the mindsets of school leaders and participants' strengthened reflective practices, increased confidence, and enhanced collaboration across school and district boundaries.

Participants greatly appreciated the highly supportive and collaborative nature of the ELAP program.

ELAP participants shared their perspectives on the quality and usefulness of ELAP's primary components (i.e., coaching and mentoring) as well as their experiences with secondary components (i.e., communities of practice and Canvas asynchronous learning modules). ELAP participants also shared their insights on which elements of ELAP they perceived as having the greatest impact on their leadership development.

Coaching and Mentoring

During interviews, ECPs, APFS, and ELF's consistently identified **coaching and mentoring** (i.e., tailored, equity-focused guidance and support for their individual leadership development) as **the most useful, supportive, and impactful components of ELAP**. One ELF shared that the “coaching and mentoring were the most helpful ... because it related specifically to the work I was doing and my project in the school.” One ECP commented that they received great observations and feedback from their CLEE coach-facilitator, and that their coaching meetings included “more concrete next steps,” which were helpful in preparing conversations with their staff.

ELAP participants also reflected on how their experiences with the program's primary components—coaching and mentoring—shaped their professional growth and leadership development. One ELF discussed the positive relationship they have with their mentor, saying:

She helped me to figure out or practice how to have hard conversations, anything that I was nervous about doing. ... She's a role model in leadership for me and her willingness to talk through it all before I had to do it was invaluable.

ECPs also reflected on their experiences as mentors, stating that they empowered their mentees to make choices and be open to conversations. One ECP shared:

I think what was great was we had a lot of opportunities to talk about real life. ... I would be able to bring her into real discipline situations, and I've had [some] real complex ones or I've been able to talk to her about building the schedule, things that she would really do, so that when the time comes for her to take on a role like this, she's had some of these conversations. She's learned how to do some of the things that you have to do in this role, and I think that that has really helped her development. I feel like her confidence in her leadership ability, [which] I've seen grow throughout the year, which I'm really pleased about. I think it's been a really positive experience for both of us.

Another ECP shared a similar experience of how their mentee has been empowered and grown as a leader, saying:

So, I have seen them grow in competence. ... I think that they are really more equipped to have difficult conversations. ...[That] sort of relational trust and psychological safety, we've been able to work through how hard that is for him in a unique way that I'm really trying hard for him to see the experience and get some empowerment.

Resources and Protocols

Participants also **highly valued the resources, protocols, and knowledge shared throughout the program**, which helped participants identify their problems of practice and next steps on how to address issues. One APF described the resources as “invaluable”:

Having access to those resources and knowing that I'm going to be able to continue to access those resources, whether they're texts or protocols or video content, when I'm done with the program is invaluable.

An ECP explained that the learning and literature from ELAP is “essential” and is the “root of managing change, whether it's [change] of systems, or of teaching practices, or of leadership.” An ELF also noted the protocols helped them to focus and be specific in identifying their areas of growth and in collaborating with peers. These resources and knowledge were identified as elements of ELAP that should remain unchanged to preserve the program's impact and are considered by participants to be essential for future cohorts.

Peer Learning and Networking Sessions

In interviews, ELAP participants shared **overwhelmingly positive reviews of the peer learning and networking sessions**. Peer learning and networking sessions were valued for their ability to foster collaboration among peers from different schools, allowing participants to exchange

strategies and insights to bring back to their own teams. One ECP noted that they appreciated the time to share problems of practice and experiences, saying:

I think it was really nice to not feel alone in the work that we're doing. ... It felt like I was in this work with other people and other people who had a similar vision, and I really appreciated that.

An ELF commented that the sessions were “very well guided with guided questions” and that participating in the sessions helped them to “see how else I can change my path to be more effective.” An APF summarized their experience in the peer learning sessions as “the best part of the program” because not only did they strengthen their capacity as a leader by facilitating some group discussions but they also exchanged experiences with “a group of people who are phenomenal and very experienced and open to having collaborative conversation.”

Usability of Canvas

Although participants found **the Canvas asynchronous learning modules useful**, their feedback was more **mixed** than with other aspects of the training, citing concerns about usability. Opinions of the Canvas platform varied widely among APFs, ECPs, and ELFs. One ECP found Canvas useful and easy to use because resources were “all in one place, so I knew where to look.” An ELF also found the asynchronous learning modules to be useful, saying that they “complemented what I was doing in class, and a lot of them happened to align with the classes I was taking at the time.” However, some ECPs and an APF reported that they encountered navigation challenges and confusion over assignments. One ECP described Canvas as being difficult to navigate and mentioned having to “click around” to find assignments. An APF noted a similar experience, explaining that their mentor also needed help navigating the site and that it was hard for them to locate supports within Canvas.

CLEE Coach-Facilitators Viewed ELAP as a Relevant and Impactful Program That Supported Its Participants' Leadership Growth

In interviews, CLEE coach-facilitators rated ELAP's usefulness and relevance in supporting participants' leadership growth using a sliding 5-point scale, with 5 indicating the highest possible rating. A rating of 4 indicated that the program was useful and relevant, though there was variation in participant engagement across districts (e.g., limited buy-in or transactional participation). Ratings of 1–3 reflected lower levels of usefulness, with 3 denoting moderate usefulness, 2 low usefulness, and 1 no relevance.

CLEE coach-facilitators described several ways in which ELAP demonstrated its usefulness, particularly in sparking mindset shifts among participants. These shifts often centered on equity and instructional leadership. One coach-facilitator described being initially unsure of the

program's impact but became convinced of its relevance after seeing tangible changes in how participants approached their work. As this coach-facilitator explained:

The conversations seem to shift; they were more student-centered. They were now leaders who were really thinking about equity ... [and] how to use data to support equity. ... I was like, "Wow, we really are making a difference."

This coach-facilitator also highlighted that participants also began translating equity-focused ideas into practice, using tools like exit tickets and other research-based strategies to inform instruction.

In addition to promoting shifts in mindset, ELAP's emphasis on reflective practice also contributed to its perceived usefulness. CLEE coach-facilitators consistently emphasized the program's focus on reflection, noting that it encouraged participants to question their leadership decisions, revisit their routines, and align their actions with broader improvement goals. One coach-facilitator explained:

[ELAP] built on the Core Leadership Practices, the cycles of continuous improvement ... being reflective, and asking questions. ... Our program, at the very least, pushes people to think about what they're doing, why they're doing it, and how they could be doing it better.

In addition, CLEE coach-facilitators emphasized that the program's usefulness extended beyond mindset and skills to foster a strong sense of professional connection among participants. As one coach-facilitator reflected, participants "really, really leaned into and understood that it wasn't necessary for them to always be alone on their journey," adding:

[Participants] were all really bummed that we were done last week, because for them, it was something that they would really look forward to—being able to have that conversation and get feedback and learn something new.

This sense of community and support reinforced the program's relevance both in content and how it helped leaders feel less isolated and more supported in their work.

In addition, coach-facilitators noted that ELAP helped build participants' confidence in their own leadership capabilities. One coach-facilitator credited the program, noting:

[ELAP] gave [participants] skills and knowledge, but we [also] instilled in them a lot of confidence. ... They now knew how to do these things, and it was going to make their job easier, improve their job quality, and improve student learning—all of those things that are important in the field.

CLEE coach-facilitators' reflections highlighted multiple dimensions of ELAP's usefulness, including shifts in leadership mindset, stronger reflective practices, increased confidence, and better peer connection, all aspects that were highlighted by ELAP participants themselves. Despite some variation in engagement, CLEE coach-facilitators broadly viewed ELAP as relevant and supportive of participants' professional growth.

CLEE STAFF REFLECTIONS

Factors, Conditions, and Strategies That Enabled Effective Participant Engagement

- Retaining staff and ensuring leadership continuity across years to maintain coherence, even with role transitions.
- Holding regular internal meetings across logistics, curriculum, and coaching teams to enable aligned planning and responsive problem-solving among ELAP staff.
- Assigning dedicated CLEE coaches to build trust and sustained participant engagement through consistent communication and individualized support.
- Using Canvas activity data—such as clicks, submissions, and page views—to implement a tiered support system to identify levels of participant engagement and provide targeted follow-up to reengage those showing signs of disengagement.
- Redesigning Canvas to improve clarity, visual appeal, and alignment with core improvement processes.
- Providing district funding for stipends and release time to support participation and reinforce expectations around deliverables such as Professional Development Points and session attendance.
- Clarifying pacing and communication through participant-facing calendars and staged Canvas notifications to help reduce overwhelm.
- Hosting midyear and end-of-year exhibitions to provide structured opportunities for participant reflection, visibility, and motivation.
- Making explicit connections to school improvement plans to increase the relevance of ELAP to participants' daily leadership responsibilities.

Barriers to ELAP Implementation

- Experiencing leadership turnover in districts, which created communication gaps and disrupted consistent support for participants.
- Facing ongoing recruitment challenges, particularly from inconsistent messaging from district leaders to participants.
- Managing program complexity because of multiple pathways and evolving structures left some participants feeling confused or overwhelmed.
- Encountering uneven district engagement, resulting in some participants lacking clarity on expectations or feeling disconnected from the broader goals.
- Navigating the voluntary nature of participation, which made it harder to enforce consistent expectations compared with credentialed or fee-based programs.

- Experiencing an initial disconnect between ELAP activities and participants' existing responsibilities, which sometimes caused the work to feel additive rather than integrated.

Implications and Recommendations

Staff reflections point to three conditions for ELAP's success: (1) sustained, personalized coaching and mentoring tied to participants' daily leadership work; (2) clear, consistent communication and expectations with district partners; and (3) program structures and tools that foster engagement, coherence, and relevance. To strengthen future implementation, CLEE could:

- Maintain high-touch coaching and mentoring as a central feature, with deliberate integration into school improvement work.
- Establish district agreements that clarify roles, expectations, and communication protocols, particularly during leadership transitions.
- Use engagement data and streamlined program design to make learning resources more accessible, reduce participant overwhelm, and ensure activities build toward clearly defined milestones.



What factors support or inhibit program implementation?

In interviews and focus groups, participants described what made the program manageable and meaningful in their professional lives as well as the obstacles that limited their ability to fully participate. The findings describe several conditions that sustained participants' commitment during ELAP and offer clear direction for strengthening future leadership development initiatives. Strong relational support, responsive program design, and collaborative, practice-based learning drove sustained engagement, while time constraints, unclear expectations, technology challenges, and inconsistent peer learning structures repeatedly hindered participation.

Strong relational support, responsive program design, and opportunities for collaborative, practice-based learning promoted participants' sustained engagement in ELAP and can inform future program implementation.

Interviews with ELAP participants revealed a range of interrelated factors that contributed to their continued engagement in the program. While individual experiences varied, these factors consistently emerged across roles as critical to sustaining engagement and may offer actionable guidance for strengthening similar leadership development initiatives.

Continue to invest in sustained, personalized coaching and mentoring to deepen engagement. ELAP participants consistently described strong, trusting relationships with their mentors and CLEE coach-facilitators as a central factor in supporting their engagement. As one ELF put it:

I think that having a great mentor and coach was key in staying engaged and enthusiastic about [ELAP].

Mentor–mentee relationships were characterized by mutual respect, personalized support, and consistent encouragement. One APF noted:

[My mentor and I] have similar mindsets about how things need to change or evolve, which has been wonderful.

Others described how mentors created concrete leadership opportunities, such as facilitating PD, participating in data team meetings, and supporting participants in navigating challenges. One ELF said:

I would think through a dilemma that I was having, and I would come to those meetings with the dilemma. We would discuss and problem solve together. ... That was helpful.

Participants also highlighted the role of CLEE coach-facilitators, who offered guidance and individualized attention throughout the program. As one ECP explained:

My coach ... did a great job of getting me grounded into the session.

For some, this support extended beyond instructional guidance. One ELF reflected:

[My coach] shared personal experiences ... that put things into perspective for me ... and in a lot of ways [they] were able to put my mind at ease. [They] were effective in [their] coaching of me educationally, but really, it's been [their] support as a person ... that I found very helpful.

Maintain high responsiveness and accessibility of program staff to foster trust and belonging. Participants valued the responsiveness and accessibility of mentors, CLEE coach-facilitators, and other CLEE staff as contributing to a sense of trust and belonging. One APF explained:

My mentor has made me feel as though there's no question I can't ask, and that asking questions is not a sign of weakness.

Participants emphasized that support was not only timely but also consistently available, even amid competing demands. As one ELF noted:

Despite their busy schedule, they were available and accessible to you.

Another ELF described CLEE's wraparound support as especially helpful for navigating the program's complexity:

You have a point person. ... I felt like I had some fairly good guidance in terms of where to get assistance ... to help try to navigate the process. ... We always knew who we were supposed to go to get an answer.

This accessibility extended across roles. As one participant shared:

Between [my CLEE coach], [my mentor], and [CLEE staff] ... my questions were always answered. My concerns were always addressed. ... I'm not used to that level of support.

Ensure ELAP activities align with participants' current responsibilities and long-term goals.

Engagement was sustained when ELAP reinforced APFs' and ELF's personal and professional goals. Many appreciated that the program reinforced their existing responsibilities rather than adding unrelated demands. A "real positive" for one ELF was that the work required by ELAP aligned with what they were already doing, making it feel meaningful rather than "extra work" and an opportunity to find deeper purpose. One ELF noted that ELAP encouraged leadership in their current roles:

[CLEE] didn't say, "Oh, you have to go to administration and do something differently." They said, "Do things within your system, within your sphere of influence, within your practices." ... That was really helpful.

Another ELF viewed the program as a way to build practical experience toward long-term aspirations:

I was motivated to fully participate so that I would have these true experiences, and so that eventually, when I am interviewing for leadership positions, I'm not talking about what I would have done if I had the opportunity; I'll be able to talk about what I did. So I wanted to make sure that I gave it my best effort.

Retain ELAP's practice-oriented design and reflective tools to promote applied learning. ELAP participants frequently emphasized the value of applied learning over passive content delivery. One ELF explained:

The biggest thing for me has been that it's not just a class you're taking online where you learn something and you fill out a worksheet. ... You're having this very practical application of these skills.

Participants highlighted tools that supported reflection and growth, including the CLP self-assessment and session protocols. One ELF explained that these tools provided needed focus:

If I hadn't had those guidelines, I probably would've been a lot more all over the place ... so that was good for focusing in on a small number of skills.

This person added that regular self-check-ins helped them track progress over time. Participants described ELAP protocols as hands-on, interactive, and collaborative, with role-switching that kept peer learning sessions engaging. Participants also said that these structured, reflective, and practice-oriented components made the program feel purposeful and relevant to their day-to-day work.

Continue intentional and well-timed communication to reinforce program structure and maintain momentum. ELAP participants appreciated having regular check-ins, protected meeting times, and advance notice for scheduling. One ELF shared:

We had our standing meeting every week. ... [My mentor] made sure that time was protected regardless of what was going on in the building.

Another ELF explained:

I thought that the times that we were face-to-face or over Zoom, it was focused and helped me to get to my next step.

These intentional touchpoints deepened relationships and kept participants aligned. As one ECP noted:

The regularity where we're having these really meaningful in-depth conversations is something that propels me forward and motivates me to do the best work that I can with CLEE.

Actively secure and promote visible support from school and district leaders to sustain engagement. Support from school and district leaders played a meaningful role in sustaining APFs' and ECPs' engagement. One ELF shared:

The administration in my building was a big factor in continuing [the work].

Several participants described how principals made scheduling adjustments to ensure they could attend ELAP sessions during the school day. At the district level, visible endorsement from central office leaders, such as from an assistant superintendent, affirmed the program's value for participants. As one ELF put it:

The district brought in CLEE from the top down ... [and] having that top-tier support ... has been huge.

An APF also noted the importance of peer support, describing how colleagues offered to help with logistics, giving some examples:

If you need a class to observe, let me know. If you need to record a lesson or a meeting, let me know. I'm happy to help in any way.

They added that having this kind of support “made it a lot easier to participate and be as engaged as I need to be.”

In schools with other ELAP participants or mentors on-site, preexisting relationships and day-to-day collaboration also helped sustain momentum. One APF said:

I was incredibly helpful for me to have [another ELAP participant] in my building ... even though our assignments weren't 100% aligned, we had many overlapping topics and being able to have someone to work with [was helpful].

Similarly, one ELF emphasized the value of having a colleague who was also participating in ELAP in the same building to discuss assignments and reflect on their experiences together. This ELF said:

[The other participant] was right across the hall, so we could talk about it. It always helps to have a peer that you're going through it with.

Encourage collaboration within and across schools to strengthen the learning community of ELAP participants. Participants said that opportunities for collaboration both within and across schools was valuable. Participants described peer learning groups and network sessions as useful spaces for exchanging ideas and receiving feedback. One ECP explained:

I've gotten really great feedback. ... Some veteran principals have said, “Here's some of my advice,” or shared resources.

Another ECP added:

It's always nice to be able to have some time to talk with other educators from different districts ... or pick their brain a little bit more about their problems of practice.

An ELF emphasized that these interactions fostered a strong sense of community:

This is a learning community. ... [CLEE] has really committed to that and is practicing what they preach [by] putting systems in place that allow people to do that.

Maintain flexibility in scheduling and deliverables to accommodate participants' competing priorities. Participants described how coach-facilitators and CLEE staff accommodated time constraints and adjusted deadlines when needed. One ELF said:

If you communicated with your coach and just said, “Hey, listen, I’m probably going to get this assignment in a day late.” They were very flexible with that. That was huge because I think a lot of people were stressed out about meeting due dates and deadlines.

Others appreciated that recordings and follow-up meetings were available when scheduling conflicts occurred. Another ELF shared:

They always had the recording sent ... so you can work on that.

Limited time, unclear expectations, technology challenges, and misaligned peer learning structures hindered participants' deeper engagement in ELAP; targeted strategies could address these barriers and strengthen future participation.

While ELAP participants described the program as meaningful and growth-oriented, they also identified recurring barriers that limited full engagement. These challenges, shared across roles, highlight opportunities to strengthen program design and delivery. Based on participant and coach-facilitator feedback and relevant research, the following recommendations address four key barriers—time constraints, unclear expectations, Canvas usability, and peer learning structure—for CLEE’s consideration in improving participant experience.

Reduce time constraints by integrating ELAP work into existing schedules and streamline documentation to reduce overload and allow participants to focus on applying their learning into their practice. ECPs, EPFs, and ELFs cited time constraints—stemming from demanding workloads and competing responsibilities—as the most significant barrier to full engagement. Many described “squeezing in” ELAP-related work after school, during lunch, or at recess. One ECP shared:

[If] I knew I had a meeting and there was [a] fire that needed to be put out, it’s always hard [to] separate yourself completely from the building and [be] present.

Others noted that assignments and reflection forms sometimes felt like “busy work” with unclear value; one ELF explained that some forms requested overlapping information, leading them to copy and paste responses “just to check off the box.” An APF expressed surprise at the volume of required meetings and assignments, saying:

When I hear that there's going to be meetings, I don't assume that means 15 to 20 meetings a year for two hours a piece and writing papers.

Provide clearer expectations and more explicit scaffolding to better support leadership transitions and to help participants meet program requirements. Several participants described uncertainty about deliverables and processes, especially when shifting from teacher to administrator roles. One ELF remarked:

Just the clarity around the expectations for the work. ... [It] would be helpful to have an exemplar or an example.

A coach-facilitator likened the current approach to “throwing them into the water, but we’re not telling them we’re throwing them into the water,” emphasizing that gradual release and explicit modeling could increase readiness. Coach-facilitators also noted that incomplete assignments sometimes detracted from coaching session effectiveness. Adult learning research (Knowles et al., 2015) reinforces the value of clear goals, practical relevance, and gradual mastery in building engagement and confidence.

Improve Canvas usability and ensure consistency in module design to make the platform a more effective and supportive tool. While some participants valued Canvas as a central hub—“all in one place, so I knew where to look”—others found it “confusing” or “not user-friendly.” Issues included difficulty locating assignments, inconsistent organization between quarters, and multiple embedded tasks without clear submission guidance. One APF noted:

Quarter 2 was a little different from quarter 1. ... Creating some continuity—like whether assignments are embedded in each module or in a separate assignments module—would be really helpful.

These challenges limited participants’ ability to complete assignments and apply learning. Standardizing module layouts, embedding clear instructions, and integrating brief navigation practice early in the program could reduce friction and ensure Canvas supports, rather than hinders, engagement.

Strengthen peer learning structures and facilitation to make them consistently relevant and impactful. While participants valued networking opportunities, many found large groups and groups of participants with mixed experience levels reduced engagement. Some participants described sessions as “long and frustrating,” “disjointed,” or dominated by “unstructured” conversation. One APF reflected that discussions often involved “huge swaths of unstructured time with people.” Coach-facilitators noted that variations in design led to inconsistent focus and format. Research on professional learning communities (Vescio et al., 2008) emphasizes

that clear norms, agendas, and targeted groupings maximize collaborative problem solving. Establishing shared facilitation parameters, grouping participants by role or challenge, and providing pre-session prompts could help ensure these sessions consistently build on participants' real-world leadership dilemmas.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE MASSACHUSETTS PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT FOR LEADERS (PAL)

The Massachusetts PAL assessment includes four authentic leadership tasks aligned with the state's Professional Standards for Administrative Leadership, and completion is required for an initial Principal and Assistant Principal license. Several APFs described the PAL licensure requirement as both a motivator and a source of tension in their ELAP experience, with one participant sharing:

Having the licensure be available at the finish line has been a huge motivator.

At the same time, APFs offered mixed views on how well ELAP prepared them for PAL, the state's licensure requirement designed to assess school leadership readiness through real-world, school-based tasks. While CLEE cannot directly teach to the PAL because of regulatory boundaries, several APFs found the program offered adjacent learning that supported their thinking. As one participant put it:

We definitely had activities that helped support thinking about PAL.

Still, many APFs saw PAL preparation as a gap. One APF remarked:

I just wish that if you're going to try to license people and get people in the position to become leaders, you have to give them the tools to do that.

Others described needing to "learn two different things"—one for ELAP and one for PAL—without a clear bridge between them.

Frustrations often centered on misalignment between ELAP assignments and Massachusetts PAL standards. APFs recalled completing a "learning plan" organized around CLEE's six Core Leadership Practices, only to later reformat the same work to align with the state's four PAL standards. One APF explained:

I had to completely reorganize all of these activities and put them into a different document.

While there was some overlap, extra time and effort were needed, as this APF explained:

It's not actually a clear copy and paste ... the categories didn't align neatly.

As a result, many participants called for better alignment from the start. One participant noted:

Every assignment we do should fulfill the state requirements. ... You just don't want it to be two mutually exclusive things.

Integrating PAL expectations into ELAP more explicitly could help reduce duplication, increase coherence, and support APFs in meeting licensure goals without losing the program's deeper developmental focus. Despite the challenges, APFs emphasized that ELAP still played a valuable role in shaping their leadership identity. As one reflected:

I'm not taking away from the value I've gotten from ELAP... but we have things we have to accomplish ... to be leaders legally in the state.

Sustaining ELAP's Impact Beyond the Grant

To ensure that the benefits of ELAP extend beyond the grant period, CLEE has implemented a range of strategies aimed at embedding practices, building local capacity, and reinforcing alignment with broader educational priorities. In focus groups, CLEE staff emphasized that sustainability was not an afterthought but a central design feature woven into the curriculum, coaching model, and program infrastructure. Even amid unexpected disruptions, including the early termination of federal funding, staff affirmed ELAP's long-term value and momentum. As one staff reflected:

We're celebrating ... that [ELAP] really did happen. And this immense impact—not just hard work, but impact—is astounding, considering what happened in the middle.

Of course, this refers to the unexpected termination of federal funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion directives.

This sense of momentum was accompanied by a continued organizational shift from equity as a broad goal to equity as a daily, practice-centered commitment. As one CLEE staff explained:

We don't expect everyone to believe or think the same things, but we use those [differences] to expand everyone's thinking and grow together. And we're now buckling down on that even more ... to help districts and participants sustain this work.

These commitments translated into specific, forward-looking strategies designed to outlast the grant period. As described by staff, the following components were especially critical in supporting sustained equity leadership and system-level change:

- **Embedded improvement frameworks promote long-term use.** CLEE staff highlighted that ELAP introduced participants to replicable cycles of improvement—including data analysis, root cause identification, and Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles—which participants can continue applying in their schools without ongoing external support.
- **Open-source tools and protocols extend access.** Materials used throughout ELAP, including coaching protocols, reflection forms, and improvement planning tools, are publicly available through CLEE. Staff noted that this open-access approach enables district and school teams to revisit and reuse resources beyond the program period.
- **Capacity-building at multiple levels increases sustainability.** CLEE staff pointed to intentional efforts to build the capacity of coach-facilitators, school leaders, and district teams as a foundation for continued implementation. Participants were not only supported during the program but also equipped to lead equity-focused work independently.

- **Connections to state priorities reinforce alignment.** In the Massachusetts context, CLEE staff noted that ELAP’s alignment with state education agency guidance (e.g., Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education frameworks and mandates) makes it more likely that participants will carry the work forward as part of broader school improvement efforts.
- **Equity-focused mindsets and practices are taking root.** According to CLEE staff, participants demonstrated greater comfort with equity-centered leadership, such as disaggregating data, engaging in reflective dialogue, and mentoring colleagues. Participants viewed these shifts in mindset and practice as durable and likely to influence future leadership work.



Conclusion

Interviews, focus groups, and ECPs’ CLP self-assessments highlighted insights into how participants and coach-facilitators experienced ELAP. Participants described the program as a powerful space for professional growth that encouraged deep reflection and fostered a clearer commitment to equity-centered practice. Many reported mindset shifts and growing confidence in their ability to lead change, supported by purposeful tools, coaching, and collaborative networks.

At the same time, participants identified actionable opportunities to strengthen future iterations of ELAP and similar leadership programs. These included (a) enhancing program consistency and clarity by streamlining assignments; (b) aligning expectations across program components; (c) better connecting activities to state licensure requirements; (d) reducing barriers to engagement through more accessible technology platforms, clear navigation tools, and flexible scheduling; (e) deepening the quality of facilitation and peer learning by investing in facilitator training, by building stronger peer networks, and by creating structured opportunities for collaborative problem solving; (f) maintaining the relational core of the program by sustaining personalized coaching and trust-building practices, and (g) integrating the program with participants’ day-to-day leadership responsibilities.

Importantly, these findings highlight both the potential and the fragility of equity-focused leadership development. Programs like ELAP both equip leaders with practical tools and reflective frameworks and provide critical support as they navigate complex and, at times, conflicting political terrain. Recent federal actions—such as the rollback of the U.S. Department of Education’s racial equity commitments and revoking of Executive Order 13,950 (2021)—have introduced new uncertainty for educators working to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (Conyers & Fields, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

In this context, school leaders play a vital role in addressing systemic inequities in their own buildings. As research shows, principals who model a strong equity stance through disaggregating data, reorganizing systems, and engaging in equity-oriented leadership practices can help disrupt harmful patterns, even when broader structures remain unchanged (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Gooden et al., 2023; Virella & Woulfin, 2023). While they cannot solve all societal problems, they can address the institutional conditions that exacerbate educational disparities.

CLEE's commitment to continuous improvement, equity, and practitioner voice was reflected in the evolution of ELAP over time. The experiences and insights shared by participants and coach-facilitators offer clear guidance for sustaining the most impactful elements of the program and designing future initiatives that prepare the next generation of equity-focused school leaders.

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Appendix.

Methodology

Research Design

This evaluation examined participant experiences in Equity Leader Accelerator Program (ELAP), with attention to factors that influenced implementation and engagement, the perceived quality and usefulness of core components, and reported shifts in equity leadership practice. The study incorporated qualitative data from multiple sources and role groups—including ELAP participants, Center for Leadership and Educational Equity (CLEE) coach-facilitators, and program staff—to build a comprehensive view of program delivery across the first 2 years of program implementation. Select findings were triangulated across perspectives and data types; in particular, interview and focus group themes were compared with trends from Core Leadership Practices (CLP) Self-Assessment data. Comparative analysis across program years surfaced both consistent patterns and meaningful variation in participant experience and application. This approach yielded a context-rich, practitioner-informed understanding of how ELAP supported equity leadership development.

About the Participants

The study focused on ELAP participants in three distinct tracks tailored to different stages of school leadership: Aspiring Principal Fellows (APFs) are experienced educators preparing to take on formal school leadership roles, such as principalships; Early Career Principals (ECPs) are principals or assistant principals in their first 3 years of school leadership; and Emerging Leader Fellows (ELFs) are teacher leaders, deans, and other site-based staff who hold formal or informal leadership roles and are developing their capacity to lead for equity. All participants served in Massachusetts public schools and were nominated or selected by their districts based on leadership responsibilities and potential. In total, the study included 20 participants. The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) team held interviews with the APFs ($n = 3$), ECPs ($n = 6$), and ELFs ($n = 11$). Additional data were collected from interviews with all CLEE coach-facilitators ($N = 6$) and a single focus group of CLEE program designers and staff ($N = 5$), who provided insight into the development and delivery of program components tailored to each leadership stage.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data sources included the semi-structured interviews and the one focus group. Secondary data sources included CLP self-assessment data collected by CLEE prior to the start of the program and at the end of the second year of programming. Interview and focus group protocols were collaboratively developed with CLEE leadership to ensure alignment with the study's research questions and to enhance contextual relevance for ELAP participants and program staff. An iterative feedback process with CLEE allowed for refinement of protocols to ensure that the questions addressed the evaluation's goals while also supporting CLEE's continuous program improvement efforts. Interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, audio-recorded with participant consent, and professionally transcribed for analysis. At the start of each session, researchers reviewed the informed consent process verbally, outlining participants' rights including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the option to decline questions or withdraw at any point. Verbal consent to participate and to be recorded was obtained and documented through audio files. Each ELAP participant received a \$50 e-gift card as an incentive for participating in interviews.

In addition to qualitative data, the research team conducted secondary analysis of CLP self-assessment data collected by CLEE. ELAP participants completed the self-assessment at three time points—fall 2023, spring 2024, and spring 2025. This report's analysis includes only those participants who completed both the preassessment in fall 2023 and final assessment in spring 2025 ($N = 16$). This data source was used to triangulate qualitative findings and examine reported shifts in participants' leadership practices over time.

Interview and Focus Group Sampling Strategy

Initially, a stratified random sampling approach was used to recruit ELAP participants across role types. Because of low response rates early in recruitment, the team shifted to a census sampling approach, inviting all eligible ELAP participants to participate. This ensured a broad and inclusive dataset while still reflecting the diversity of roles and experiences.

In addition, five CLEE staff (who designed and implemented the program) and six coach-facilitators (who supported participant learning) were purposively selected for inclusion in the study. These individuals were recruited based on their direct involvement in ELAP design and delivery, offering critical insights into implementation decisions, participant engagement, and the evolution of program strategies over time.

Data Analysis Procedures

The AIR team used NVivo software to support qualitative data analysis. First, transcripts were coded to a set of predetermined nodes aligned to the research questions and CLEE's CLP framework. This deductive approach was followed by inductive coding to identify emergent themes across participant roles and program years. To ensure consistency and reliability, the AIR team engaged in multiple norming discussions and iterative codebook refinements. Interrater reliability checks were conducted on a subset of transcripts to calibrate interpretations and uphold coding rigor.

To supplement qualitative findings, the AIR team drew on CLP self-assessments, which reflected ECPs' own ratings of their growth across six leadership domains. The AIR team conducted descriptive statistical analyses of these data, examining changes over time to triangulate and contextualize qualitative results.

To strengthen the credibility of findings, the AIR team established a reporting threshold: only themes that were reflected in the responses of at least three or more participants were included in this report. In rare cases, insights shared by only one or two participants were included when they offered particularly compelling or unique perspectives on program implementation. This approach ensured that reported findings represented shared patterns of experience rather than isolated viewpoints.

Ethical Considerations

The AIR team adhered to ethical standards for human subject research throughout the project. All interview and focus group participants were informed of the study's purpose, their rights, and their ability to opt out at any time. Informed consent was obtained verbally at the start of each recorded session. To ensure confidentiality, identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants are referred to using either pseudonyms or role descriptors in all reporting. All data were stored on secure, password-protected servers accessible only to authorized AIR staff.

Research team members completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training and certification in human subjects research. The data collection instruments, protocols, and analysis plans were submitted to the AIR's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which reviewed the materials and determined the study to be exempt under federal guidelines for minimal-risk research.

Limitations

The evaluation faced several logistical constraints, particularly related to data collection timing. Interruptions in Supporting Effective Educator Development funding in spring 2025 temporarily paused the study and limited the ability to maintain consistent outreach and scheduling with participants. In addition, the study relied on self-reported data—including interviews, focus groups, and the CLP self-assessments—to capture participants' perceptions and reflections rather than externally verified behavior change.

As with most qualitative research, findings are not intended to be generalized in all contexts. Rather, the purpose is to provide in-depth insight into participants' experiences and to illuminate patterns in reported changes in leadership thinking and practice. Despite these limitations, the study's use of multiple data sources, including surveys and self-assessments, and its rigorous coding and analysis procedures, strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.



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