



Wisconsin  
Evaluation  
Collaborative

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# Research to Practice Inclusive Communities (RPIC) Project Cross-Case Study Summary

*for the* Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



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# Acknowledgements

## About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC)

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) is housed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. WEC's team of evaluators supports youth-serving organizations and initiatives through culturally responsive and rigorous program evaluation. Learn more at <http://www.wec.wceruw.org>.

## About the Wisconsin Minnesota Comprehensive Center Region 10

The Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center - Region 10 (WMCCI0) aims to improve the academic achievement of elementary and secondary school students in the two-state region by advancing the use of evidence-based practices. It is operated by three organizations: the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC), the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI), and Education Analytics (EA). Learn more at <http://www.wmcci0.org>.

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## Section I

# Introduction

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative and Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center for Region 10 are working with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to conduct a longitudinal evaluation of the Statewide System of Support (SSoS) for federally identified schools and districts. The SSoS provides districts and schools with tiered assistance (intensive, targeted, and universal) and monitoring to match school and district needs. Two primary questions frame the evaluation: 1) How are resources and supports provided by DPI contributing to improved adult practices in schools and districts identified through Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)? 2) To what extent do the improved practices accelerate growth for students of color and students with IEPs and promote improved student outcomes for all students in the identified schools and districts?

The year one evaluation includes case studies of “targeted” SSoS supports. The Research to Practice Inclusive Communities (RPIC) grant, funded by federal special education resources, represents one of the areas of DPI support for school district continuous improvement efforts. In the sections that follow, we first provide an overview of the RPIC grant and evaluation. Next, we summarize the participating districts sampled for case studies. We then present RPIC grant implementation successes and challenges identified through four case studies, followed by perceived impacts on participating districts’ educational environments. We conclude with key findings from the four case studies and related questions and suggestions for grant participant and DPI consideration.

## RPIC overview

As noted above, the RPIC grant is offered as a level 2, targeted support within the Statewide System of Support framework, and participating districts can use this as an improvement strategy for schools identified as needing improvement through the Every Student Succeeds Act and/or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The goal of the RPIC grant is to develop inclusive learning communities within schools that include the following characteristics: 1) equitable, multi-level systems of support; 2) universal design for learning, and 3) co-planning, co-teaching, co-assessing. The RPIC theory of action states that:

If districts are trained on how to develop and then implement consistent processes ensuring that all educational environments are accessible, inclusive, and equitable and are supported through collaborative decision-making teams, coaching, and shared leadership, then districts will experience improved outcomes for every student and accelerated improvement for students of color and students with IEPs.

The RPIC is a five-year grant which started in the 2019-20 school year. It is currently in its third implementation year. DPI invited Wisconsin districts with fewer than 5,000 students to apply for the grant. Ten districts initially applied and all were selected. After the first year, three districts withdrew from the grant and three additional districts joined. After the second year, two other districts withdrew. Currently there are eight participating districts.

The RPIC grant has three objectives:

1. Districts will implement collaborative linked teaming structures, supported by coaching, to ensure a consistent approach for collaborative decision making that will lead to improved outcomes for each and every student.
2. Districts will ensure that educational environments are accessible, inclusive, and equitable for each and every student, by implementing sustainable teacher teams leading to improved outcomes for every student and accelerated improvement for students of color and students with IEPs.
3. Key student outcomes including inclusion, agency, voice, participation, attendance, engagement, discipline, graduation rates, and achievement improve for students with IEPs and students who are systematically marginalized.

Source: [DPI RPIC website](#)

To address the objectives, districts receive \$16,000 in funding, professional learning opportunities, and coaching support. Learning opportunities focus on professional learning communities (PLCs), equity, and community engagement. District grant funding pays for training modules focused on equity and PLCs. Participants are required to attend the equity training provided by Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity ([ICS Equity](#)). Participants also attend PLC training, Leading Professional Learning Communities, provided by Solution Tree and the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators (AWSA). Community engagement training is a virtual training called “Leading by Convening.” School principals and district RPIC coaches also attend the AWSA Impactful Coaching academy.

In addition to attending training, district participants are expected to follow a timeline of activities and use tools and assessments. According to the RPIC Guidance Document shared with districts, one of the first activities undertaken by districts is the development of teams. Districts develop a district leadership team (DLT), schools within the district develop school leadership teams (SLTs), and within each school collaborative teacher teams are created.

DLTs are required to include the following roles:

- District Administrator
- Principals from each school
- Special Education/Pupil Service Director
- CESA coach
- Internal RPIC coach
- Curriculum and Instruction Director
- Community/Family stakeholder

SLTs include the following roles:

- School principal
- Internal RPIC coach
- General educator
- Special educator
- Community/Family stakeholder

Teacher teams include:

- General educators
- Special educators
- Instructional coach
- Additional staff who inform specially designed instruction (Speech Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist, Physical Therapist, Psychologist, Social Worker, Registered Nurse)

DPI guidance recommends monthly DLT and SLT meetings, with DLTs meeting at least 3 hours each month and SLTs meeting at least 1 hour per month. Teacher teams should meet for one hour per week.

Participants are provided with tools and assessments to plan implementation activities and monitor progress. District teams use the District Capacity Assessment to assess readiness and plan implementation, and SLTs and teacher teams use the Wisconsin PLC fidelity rubric to assess progress on their work. Additional tools and assessments are shared with districts, such as a meeting documentation template, communication plan template, the Leading by Convening rubric, the Vibrant School Scale, Wisconsin Best Practices for Inclusive Education, and the Inclusive Classroom Profile.

Districts share their results from the PLC fidelity assessment, the Best Practices for Inclusive Education Fidelity Scale, and the District Capacity Assessment yearly with the DPI RPIC program lead. The Vibrant School Scale will be collected for the first time in the spring of 2022 and reflections on the Leading by Convening rubric are not shared with DPI. Districts also submit a mid-year and end-of-year report to DPI.

Implementation of grant activities is supported by an internally designated coach and an external coach from the regional Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) who is identified by DPI. Coaches receive training on grant components as well as coaching strategies. The external coach is a member of the DLT and provides support to district and school leaders and the internal coach. The internal coach is a member of each of the district's SLTs and provides support to the collaborative teacher teams.

As mentioned above, districts are provided with an "RPIC Participation Guidance to District Teams" living document that provides background information, gives a grant overview, and details requirements and anticipated outcomes. The document is updated by DPI as needed and was last updated in August 2021.

## Evaluation overview

In partnership with the DPI lead contact for the RPIC grant, we identified four of the eight RPIC districts for case studies. Those districts were purposefully selected to include two districts with and two districts without federal identifications. The case studies were guided by five evaluation questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the districts and schools that participate in RPIC?
2. What motivates grantees to join and stay engaged in RPIC?
3. What resources do districts have to engage in this work?
4. To what extent have district and school teams established the critical conditions needed to successfully implement inclusive learning communities?
5. To what extent do participants perceive that (a) educational environments within RPIC project schools have become accessible, inclusive, and equitable for all students, and (b) families and community members have been engaged as authentic decision-making partners in activities and outcomes related to students with disabilities?



In order to answer our evaluation questions for each of the four districts, we invited the internal and external coaches, the district administrator, two school principals, and educators from two schools within the district, as well as community stakeholders on the district leadership and school leadership teams, to participate in interviews. We also spoke with the DPI project lead to gain understanding of the program and to obtain RPIC program documents. Finally, we reached out to the four districts that withdrew from the RPIC grant and were able to interview district leaders from two of those districts. Table I presents the total number of individuals interviewed.

Finally, in order to preserve the confidentiality of respondents, in some instances interviewees are only identified as “respondent” or “participant” rather than by their positional titles.

Interview transcripts and documents were analyzed for themes related to the evaluation questions.

As with any evaluation, there are certain study limitations. Foremost for this study, we spoke with a sample of districts (4 of 8 districts), and a sample of teachers and principals within each district. Findings cannot be generalized across all teachers, principals, and schools within the included districts nor across all districts involved in the RPIC grant. Despite these limitations, the study design provides for a cross-section of participant input on grant progress, challenges, and opportunities for improvement through in-depth discussions with the sample teachers, principals, district administrators, coaches, and community stakeholders.

**Table I: Participants Interviewed**

DISTRICT	DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR	OTHER DLT MEMBER	CESA COACHES	INTERNAL COACHES	PRINCIPALS	TEACHERS	COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS
Antigo	1	0	0	2	2	5	1
Ashland	0	1	1	1	2	0	1
Ithaca	1	0	1	1	1	2	0
South Milwaukee	1	2	1	1	2	9	1
Abbotsford	1	0	-	-	-	-	-
Northland Pines	0	2	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	4	5	4	5	7	16	3

## Overview of districts

The districts included in this case study are small and located mostly in rural communities, with one in a suburban community. The smallest district has three schools with 446 students, and the largest has six schools with 2,819 students. An overview of each district and a summary of their student demographics are shown in tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2: District Characteristics**

DISTRICT	LOCATION	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	STUDENT ENROLLMENT	STATE REPORT CARD RATING	FEDERAL IDENTIFICATIONS	YEARS IN RPIC
Antigo	CESA 9	5	1,994	Meets Few Expectations	--	3
Ashland	CESA 12	4	1,836	Meets Few Expectations	2 TSI schools: IDEA needs assistance, year 2	2
Ithaca	CESA 3	3	401	Exceeds Expectations	--	3
South Milwaukee	CESA 1	8	2,819	Meets Expectations	1 TSI school: IDEA needs assistance, year 2	2

Source: 2020-21 DPI report card

**Table 3: Student Demographics**

STUDENT GROUP	ANTIGO	ASHLAND	ITHACA	SOUTH MILWAUKEE
RACE / ETHNICITY				
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.4%	19.4%	0.0%	0.5%
Asian	0.4%	0.1%	0.7%	1.1%
Black or African American	1.2%	1.0%	1.0%	5.8%
Hispanic or Latino	6.6%	3.6%	3.5%	24.7%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%
White	85.9%	66.3%	93.3%	61.4%
Two or more races	4.7%	9.5%	0.7%	6.4%
OTHER DEMOGRAPHICS				
Students with disabilities	16.6%	15.8%	19.0%	13.8%
Economically disadvantaged	60.5%	68.8%	48.9%	54.7%
English learners	1.7%	0.0%	1.0%	5.6%

Source: 2020-21 DPI report card

Each of the four districts indicated that addressing achievement gaps was one of their main motivations for applying for the RPIC grant. For example, Antigo shared that after doing a deep dive into their data, they recognized that they had achievement gaps, and that universally, student achievement was below state average. They believed that they needed to “start at ground zero” in order to raise student achievement. Similarly, Ashland’s motivations included wanting to address a historically high percentage of students with disabilities being pulled out for services, and large achievement/opportunity gaps among minoritized student populations. The four districts also indicated that additional training and support related to their development of PLCs was a motivation for applying for the grant. Finally, a third motivation that emerged was a desire to learn more about equity and inclusive practices and communities.

Prior to joining the RPIC grant, Ithaca and Antigo had attended PLC training and AWSA’s School Administrators Institute for Transformational Leadership (SAIL) academy. Ashland had also invested in PLC trainings prior to joining RPIC. South Milwaukee had experience with the ICS Equity training.

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## Section 2

# RPIC Implementation Successes and Challenges

Several factors impacted districts' implementation of the RPIC elements, including districts' previous professional learning (e.g., readiness and capacity), timing of when districts joined the RPIC grant, and the size of the districts. In this section, we discuss the core RPIC elements districts are implementing and the successes and challenges they have encountered.

## Collaborative team structures

DLTs and SLTs have been established in the four districts. Some of the districts had existing team structures that were modified to meet the requirements of RPIC. For example, Ashland had a shared leadership team structure that was already in place and Antigo had a district leadership team that was already regularly meeting. South Milwaukee had an existing administrative council and added members in order to meet grant recommendations. In order to build teams, Ashland developed an interview process to identify and select membership for its DLT and SLTs. Interested staff who demonstrated a good fit and support of the district's equity and instructional practices work were selected. Candidates were also asked to be willing to co-lead district- or school-based initiatives. For Ithaca, due to their small size and because they have a combined middle and high school building, it was a challenge to develop a DLT and SLTs with the required roles represented without overlapping staff. According to one Ithaca team member, "It's been a challenge to delineate roles because we are so small." Several of the positions on the DLT were filled by default by administrators who are responsible for multiple district roles. In all of the districts, the size of DLT and SLTs and roles represented varied based on school and district size and staff availability.

Having consistent representation by community stakeholders on the DLTs and SLTs was a common challenge in each district. In Ashland and Antigo, they currently have a community stakeholder on their DLTs but not their SLTs. In South Milwaukee, some of the SLTs had community stakeholders and some did not. Some of the community stakeholders on the SLTs and the representative on the DLT were also district employees. A team member in Antigo shared that "it's very difficult to involve community in something that has consistent work to it." Other participants reinforced this notion that meeting times are a main obstacle for not having greater community participation in meetings and trainings.

The leadership teams are supported by internal, district RPIC coaches and external CESA coaches. The CESA coaches typically work with the district coaches to present information to the DLT and help guide the DLT's work. Grant participants explained that coaches help to ensure the teams are on the "right track." One interviewee shared that the CESA coach helps to "redirect" them if they are "spinning [their] wheels." Another said that their CESA coach strives to help the teams see "the big picture" and introduces tools along the way that may be helpful to them. In some districts, in addition to supporting the teams and the internal coaches, the CESA coaches work with district directors. For example, in South Milwaukee, the CESA coach spends considerable time individually with the Curriculum Director and works with the Special Education Director, and in Antigo the CESA coach meets weekly with the Director of Pupil Services. The internal coaches support the SLTs and help create agendas and facilitate meetings. Internal coaches work in a variety of roles within their districts in addition to their coaching responsibilities, such as associate principal, instructional coach, reading specialist, and speech language pathologist.

## PLC implementation

PLC structures and implementation levels varied across and within districts. Districts that had previously attended PLC trainings found that the initial PLC training that staff went through “didn’t stick,” that practices were “inconsistent,” and “that training had not necessarily transferred into impact.” For these districts, “there was a knowledge base” to build on, but the structures were not in place. This resulted in some districts focusing PLC work within specific buildings (e.g., only elementary) or focusing on the basic elements of calendaring PLC time, implementing common agendas, and focusing on the use of data. Similarly, the district that had not previously engaged in PLC trainings was also focused on getting those key elements in place and consistently applied. As one district leader stated, “We are making progress, but people need to understand what a PLC is about. It’s not another meeting, it’s the meeting. It makes other things happen and should bring in professionals from across the school.” Another leader agreed, “We’re not there yet. We’ve got a lot of work to do, but PLCs have helped move that conversation along.” One leader reinforced that they “continue to build capacity” around PLCs. Some team members mentioned that their SLT is “really behind the [PLC] work,” helping to keep teams on pace and trying to maintain consistent implementation. In some of the districts, instructional and administrative coaches have also been utilized as supports for the PLCs.

When initiating PLC work, two of the districts, realized foundational work was needed on standards of learning, proficiency benchmarks, and unpacking essential standards. One district team member shared that they “didn’t have a curriculum... [we] knew of the standards but didn’t really have them in place. [We] hadn’t done anything with unpacking standards.” Therefore, the district has had to spend considerable time finding standards, unpacking standards, and making sure there was a sequence in which all the standards were being adequately taught. The other district reported that foundational support was required for staff to develop standards for learning and related targets.

In the other two districts, each school has worked to establish common, collaborative team time in the school schedules. They have implemented common agendas and review common sets of data. In one of these districts, it was reported that teams have become more comfortable using data for decision making. For example, teams can discuss what the data are telling them and how they can support the needs of all students in their classrooms. Meetings have moved from being more reactive to more active and planning-focused. The other district reported that they have “made progress, but still need a lot of work on using data to drive instruction.” As described above, DPI articulates in its RPIC theory of action that the collaborative PLC team structures support the equity and inclusion work. An educator from one of the districts commented on how “a lot of our PLC work is closely tied to the equity work we are doing as a district. As we move toward having C3 [co-plan, co-lead, co-assess] teams, we are really working hard on making sure the structure of PLCs are pretty straightforward and organized, so we will be ready with C3.”

One of the districts that withdrew from the RPIC grant shared that although they had hoped to do a “PLC reboot,” they found the required PLC RPIC trainings and work redundant and duplicative of work that they had already done. They felt like they would “take a step forward and two steps back and then a step forward and two steps back.” In addition, they wanted the focus of their collaborative team time to be on their English Learner (EL) students and felt that was not a clear focus of the grant. They realized this need may be “unique” to them, but in the end, it was the reason they left.

# Equity and inclusion

Staff in each district are viewing the required ICS Equity modules. It appears that across the districts, DLT and SLT members are supportive of the ICS Equity modules and related equity work. In one district, a leader shared that the modules were well received and stated:

I guess it's opening up conversations. Part of the shift that's supported by the grant is moving some important conversations along. Some other structures, with equity, we have done some work around more inclusive practices for students with special needs, but the equity work has provided the why behind it. And the rationale, as far as why is it important to include kids [and] why do we need to bring services to kids rather than kids to services?

An SLT member stated that many staff are "pleased... to be able to talk about inclusive communities and equity and understand biases." That said, it was also reported that some staff not on a SLT have reacted less positively about the equity work. As one teacher explained, "We are getting some pushback with some things in the equity modules. We then as a team keep coming back together on what we need to go over. Definitely some people believe their positions are being attacked or they perceive that they are doing some things wrong." Another interviewee described it as "cognitive dissonance," further explaining that "some staff say, this isn't what I'm used to, this isn't what I think we should do." It was also shared that there are a fair number of staff that "think it's an attack on them, and they dig in."

Relatedly, some SLT members reported that although they have viewed the modules, they felt unprepared to lead the work with their peers and have challenging conversations with staff who were not fully supportive of the equity work. One participant shared that teachers "do not feel comfortable going through a module and then all of a sudden leading that for their colleagues, especially with how emotional and sensitive some of these topics can be." Another SLT member articulated that they wished "some of the other staff weren't so hesitant" and that non-SLT members "need to put in as much if not more work into [the] learning."

In addition to in-school challenges, there have also been reported challenges of pushback from school board members and community members. Some districts have found creative solutions to better include their school boards in the RPIC process. South Milwaukee thoughtfully extended the ICS Equity training to the school board. As a result, they have seen less pushback on the equity trainings than the other districts. A South Milwaukee district leader stated when planning the work with the school board they asked, "...do you want updates or do you want to be part of the work? And they said they wanted to be part of the work, so that was an important moment in keeping this work on target." Another leader in the district explained, "For first time, we are seeing the district administrative team reaching out to the board for joint learning. I keep going back to the comment that [the ICS Equity trainers] share, 'we all do the best we know how, but not the best we can.' We have to learn as an organization to do better and that includes [the] school board. That's a big key and should be part of grant but it is not – involving [the] school board."

Limited time represents another notable challenge. Team members spoke about not having enough time to process and discuss the modules and trainings, too much time between professional development days when the equity discussions take place, the challenge of implementing all of the grant activities at the same time (i.e., PLCs and ICS), and the impact of COVID-19 on the timeline of grant activities. One team member said, "The biggest struggle when I think about this stuff is just time." Another educator said more specifically, "we need more time to sit and talk and discuss some of these things." Someone else shared the impact of COVID-19 on the timeline of the grant work: the "timeline for this was pretty solid for a normal school year, but we had these two very strange school years that kind of derailed a lot of stuff and made things very difficult." Another timing issue that was raised is the amount of time between staff PD days. One educator said that it is a "long timeframe" and that the work "falls out and then comes back up;" if it were addressed "more often," it would be a "good thing." Finally, it was noted by participants that the pace of expected grant activities presents a challenge, especially for districts or schools that did not previously have structures in place or who joined the grant later, and that differentiation in activity timelines could help district and school staff implement structures and process modules and act on data related to implementation more successfully.

In contrast, team members from the other districts worried that because of the lack of school board and community support they could get their “legs cut out from under [them].” In one district, they shared a situation that occurred at a school board meeting and the impact it has had on their work: “At one of our last school board meetings, they were very frustrated with the word ‘equity.’... Now we’re doing a little bit of backtracking because some community members don’t like the word ‘equity,’ and are just concerned that we’re teaching critical race theory.” It has been frustrating for team members to “backpedal” and reiterate the purposes of the RPIC grant with both the school board as well as some staff members.

It was the pushback from the community and lack of school board support that led one of the four school districts that withdrew from the grant to end their participation. Directors from this district shared that there was “community concern regarding the project” and that “it really blew up and it blew up quickly.” This district had not engaged its school board in the related trainings but had updated the board on their progress. They further stated that if there had not been pushback from the community, they would have stayed in the grant. They do continue to implement the RPIC structures that were put into place.

Suggestions for increasing support from staff, community, and school boards from team members included ensuring that all stakeholders understand the “why” of the work: for example, focusing on the “kids” and the “purpose” of the work and avoiding “politicized jargon.” Specific to the community, one educator stated that they “need to make sure that the community understands what equity is and proportional representation is, versus just saying equity... those kinds of buzzwords really confuse the community.” A related suggestion was making sure the work of the district was focused on one goal, making sure staff and the community understood the “why” of the goal, and then aligning work.

## RPIC Assessments

Participating districts are completing the required assessments. When asked about assessment use, interviewees most frequently discussed the district capacity assessment and the PLC fidelity rubric. Antigo and Ithaca shared examples of how they used results from the district capacity assessment. In Antigo, they used the results to develop their continuous improvement plan, which they reported that they did not have before the RPIC grant. In Ithaca, they used the results as “a roadmap to set goals and structure their work.” They have used it to identify their strengths and also as a tool to encourage staff to be open and honest with each other. At the school level, there was variation as to how meaningful teams believed the PLC fidelity rubric to be. Some believed the assessments provided useful information, as one SLT member shared:

I feel like all of this work is about really good conversations about kids. What are the systems we are missing or that are wrong? When we go through fidelity surveys we can identify what’s missing and problem solve through those. The support comes through conversations and hearing others’ experiences and working to problem solve together.

Another SLT member in a different district shared that the reflection from the PLC fidelity rubric was helpful and that “it was good to get the check.” According to other team members, “... it has been used to get staff input” and the results are used to “... create goals so we can improve our scores.” Another team member said, “... we constantly come back to the rubric and look at ‘have the numbers grown?’ or ‘can we increase our score?’”



Across all teams, RPIC coaches helped support the implementation of the assessments and the analysis of the results. Team members reported value in the assessments, but also challenges with their implementation. Challenges primarily related to the time needed to carry them out and process results into action plans. For example, some mentioned that the assessments are not necessarily hard to do, but staff run out of time to complete them. Others expressed struggles with the number of assessments and limited time to process and plan. As one participant explained, “We do all of this data collection and to be able to really study that and create an action plan would take a lot of time. We can’t effectively use that. We do more data collecting than action planning.” In addition, some expressed frustration with the timing of one assessment (PLC fidelity) being administered in the spring and then again in the fall; it was noted that PLCs do not tend to meet in the summer, so there is little change. Repeating the assessment in the fall “seemed like time not well spent...” Team members agreed that the conversations around the tools are helpful and important, but they just do not know how to fit it all in.

## Family and community engagement

As noted above, family and community engagement on the DLTs and the SLTs has been challenging for the districts included in this study, as is having broad support for the equity work from their communities. In addition, one district struggled with cultural challenges, including attitudes and beliefs about kids, collective efficacy, and willingness to take responsibility for student learning. Participants in this district, including community representatives, agreed that the district has a history of struggling with inclusive practices. While participants reported starting to see that change, there is still much work to be done to ensure that the right kind of conversations occur on a regular basis. In other districts, conversations with participants indicated that systematic family and community engagement efforts were not yet present. In at least one district, communication planning related to family and community engagement was a current priority. They are currently solidifying a communication plan that includes “two-way communication” between the district and the community.

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## Section 3

# Perceived Impact on Educational Environments

When asked how staff practices have changed as a result of the RPIC grant and the impact those changes have had on creating inclusive learning communities, many respondents talked about positive changes in conversations, shifts in language, the implementation of collaborative teacher teams, and an increase in special education inclusive practices.

## Conversations and Language

The RPIC trainings and tools are “forcing [staff] to examine some of [their] long held beliefs or practices that just aren’t working.” One staff member shared that participation in the RPIC grant “... has caused a lot of self-reflection, thinking about systems, and looking at data. It has led to changing conversations about our current reality and lives here. So that has been major change in our district. Listening to teachers talk about where we are as a district.” A coach shared that “a lot of conversations are happening now that never happened, even last year, or the year before, but realizing, ‘oh my beliefs do impact my behavior.’” An example that was shared is related to “staff questioning certain practices that [they] have in place. For example, our honors English or AP classes and the types of students who are not in activities.”

Related to the self-reflection and conversations, there have also been shifts in the language used to describe students. Participants noted that staff are much more likely to use asset-based thinking and speaking, rather than deficit-based language. Staff are becoming more comfortable holding each other accountable when they hear deficit-based language, using prompts to gently coach their peers back to asset-based language. Interview participants mentioned they are starting to see consistency in language used by staff, particularly with how they address students and when staff encounter deficit-based language, they are becoming more comfortable confronting it. In one district, coaching on courageous conversations around equity has been especially successful in terms of the cycle of coaches introducing and practicing the stems in leadership team meetings, the principals trying out the stems and scenarios, and principals then bringing feedback to the leadership team level.

## Inclusive practices

Conversations prompted by and knowledge gained from equity trainings have led to more and stronger inclusive practices. One interviewee shared that the “equity modules have really opened up the conversations around understanding history of marginalization and strength-based language. We had a strong culture already, but those have helped solidify those pieces. So that has strengthened our resolve to include all students in the gen ed environment.” In addition, because the RPIC grant builds in support through coaching and teams, it was reported that staff are “more open to the idea of [special education inclusion] because... [they] have supports in place ... it’s a team approach.” One team said that, as a result of realigning special education teachers with grade levels (rather than by category), district participants have noted steady increases in the amount of time that students with IEPs are included with their typically-developing peers. In addition, the district redesigned their IEP meeting agendas and meeting norms to facilitate more asset-based conversations with teachers and parents. As a result, the district has seen early positive shifts in how students with disabilities and their families feel. Another SLT member described the shift with special education services in their school from primarily a pull-out model (with about 10% inclusion) to an approach that is inclusive in about 85-90% of the cases, with “the exception that some of speech therapies are difficult to provide in a full class setting.”

Beyond more inclusive learning environments for special education students, many staff reflected that, as a result of PLC meetings and equity presentations related to classroom practices, they had become more intentional in the things that they do. One staff member noted changes that are beginning to happen due to increased collaborative time:

...many staff have reflected during these PLC meetings and presenting on the practices that they use within their classroom and being more intentional in the things that we do, and the choices that we make within the classroom to treat students equitably. And ways that they engage with their students or others about their students, so having more of a positive tone when talking about all students. And then actively looking for ways to grow in their understanding of various identities and especially those that are made up of our student body to help make our relationship stronger with students.

## PLC structures

When asked how staff practices have changed as a result of the RPIC grant and what impact those changes have had on creating inclusive learning communities, many of the interviewees discussed the collaborative teacher teams. Although PLC structures and levels of implementation varied within and across districts, PLCs were described as “driving good change” resulting in “deeper learning and understanding.” They are also “helping to shake up the work, those traditional lessons that have been taught for 25 years...PLC work is getting around that, [which is a] huge plus.” Another educator shared that “the PLC work is helping [them] bridge the gaps.” It was also reported that the comfort level with PLCs has improved since they were initially implemented: that “at first, people were intimidated by the process,” they didn’t “want to share test scores, and now ... people [are] more willing to share and that it’s okay if I’m struggling with a certain topic or, you know, they share strategies.”

In other instances, it was described that in PLCs, “the types of conversations have changed. We’ve told people there are three different kinds of conversations: it can be on the four questions of PLC or co-planning to co-serve [equity work] or unpacking [standards work]. Should see a balance of those happening. If [they] tip any way, it should be on the 4 questions of PLC around student work.”

Those who are still working on implementing more basic PLC elements noted that they successfully changed their master schedule to allow “for staff to learn.” As one interviewee described, “we added more PLC targeted time, so it’s not just in-service, but it’s collaborative time for the teachers.” A related change that was reported is teachers not just having collaborative time but also being intentionally collaborative with peers. One elementary staff member noted changes that are beginning to happen are due to increased collaborative time. Others reported that they “still do not have highly effective collaborative teams, but we are working toward that with [the] PLC framework” and they are starting to see a “shift.”

Although we didn’t specifically ask about leveraging existing improvement tools, such as the local Educator Effectiveness (EE) process, to support implementation and monitoring of RPIC-related professional practice changes, one principal mentioned utilizing the EE goal process to support RPIC and school improvement efforts.

In summary, although each district has experienced challenges, participants largely reported that the RPIC grant is helping them “make good strides,” that it is the “right work,” and “it’s really helped provide [them with a] framework to be more successful as a district.” Further integration of the RPIC grant in school and district improvement planning and the use of existing improvement tools may help advance the work.

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## Section 4

# Conclusions: Summary of Findings and Questions to Consider

Our cross-case analysis revealed five key findings. These common findings are summarized here, along with corresponding questions for grant and district leaders to consider that may help strengthen RPIC impact.

### Readiness for grant activities

Readiness for the grant activities varied across districts. Districts that believed they were prepared by already having similar structures in place or having attended relevant trainings struggled to establish required elements and implement activities according to the prescribed timeline. For the two districts that started a year later, they felt an even greater sense of urgency and haste to adhere to the original 5-year grant timeline. Two of the districts also struggled with the curriculum and standards work that is necessary for high functioning PLCs. These latter districts might benefit from exploring the use of [high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum](#), which can limit the perceived need to “unpack” or identify high-leverage standards.

- What additional guidance or requirements around team membership, PLC implementation, and use of high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum, can be shared with districts before they begin RPIC grant work?
- Is it possible to differentiate the grant timeline/pacing based on grantee progress and when a district joined the RPIC grant?

One of the districts included in the study is significantly smaller than the other districts, so some grant requirements did not make sense to some district participants when they tried to implement them. For example, the membership requirement of the DLT and SLT had substantial overlap. Two districts also had to allocate other resources to support grant activities (e.g., to ensure all staff were able to access modules). Another district stated that they felt like grant expectations were unclear and changing. Districts engage with trained CESA coaches who help guide their work and are presented with an “RPIC Participation Guidance to District Teams” document. If not already required, it may be useful to have participating districts sign off on an assurance document when joining the grant.

- How can grant guidance be adaptable for districts of different sizes, especially those that are smaller?
- Is it possible to differentiate funding amounts based on district size and/or provide guidance on other resources available (e.g., Title I or II funding)?
- How can grant requirements and changes in grant activities be communicated more clearly?
- Is additional documentation needed for participants to indicate understanding of grant requirements?

### Assessment streamlining and improvement process integration

Overall, participants found value in the required assessments, but struggled to use the results for meaningful reflection and action planning because of the number of assessments and the assessment schedule. Additionally, although we did not specifically ask about local continuous improvement processes, one principal leveraged the local EE process to support RPIC processes and goals. It was unclear how other district and school leaders created coherence and alignment between RPIC assessments and existing local processes.

- Are all grant assessments essential for progress on key grant elements, or is it possible to center planning around a smaller number?
- What changes in the assessment schedule can be made to allow for more school and district processing and reflection?
- How might grant and district leaders integrate other existing improvement activities, including the EE System and school and district strategic planning, to help focus PLC work, progress monitor, and create coherent continuous improvement processes?

### Support from community, school board, and staff not on a leadership team

According to interviewees, support for the RPIC work from individuals not directly involved in a DLT or SLT (additional staff, school board members, and community members) was less apparent than that of those on a team. One district successfully included school board members in their RPIC training activities and saw less pushback on the work. The other districts may have benefited from not only sharing updates with their school boards, but also including them in trainings. Now that several districts are facing pushback,

- How can DPI provide guidance on communicating with, and on strategies for challenging conversations with, community members, school board members, and staff who are not readily supportive of the work?
- In the long term, what guidance can DPI share with districts about including school board members in initial trainings and having conversations with communities about the work earlier in the RPIC grant timeline?

### Engaging the community

Engaging community members was one of the most challenging elements of the RPIC grant. There is no doubt the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the ability to connect in-person with community members and families. In one instance, a district experienced success in developing a stronger relationship with the community; however, as described above, this is an area of continued work for the districts. Additionally, districts did not appear to have in place strategies to engage communities; respondents anticipated that these might be the focus of future RPIC activities.

- Although the pandemic puts restrictions on in-person events, what other opportunities might there be to engage families and community members within and outside the school?

- Districts participate in online training related to community engagement. What additional resources and guidance can be given to districts and schools related to developing and strengthening relationships with their communities?
- How are districts prepared to meet goals for improved student belonging through RPIC activities?

### Further collaboration within and outside of the district

Districts appreciated opportunities earlier in the grant timeline to collaborate with similar districts who are engaging in the work. RPIC coaches and CESA coaches value their collaborative time together. Similarly, school leaders appreciate time to collaborate with their peers, but it is not built into the grant structures.

- Is it possible for principals to network outside of DLT meetings to co-plan school module roll-out as well as learn from each other's successes and challenges?
- Is it possible for district leaders to network with other RPIC districts in order to discuss grant activities and collaboratively problem solve?

