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FullScale

Washington State
Mastery-Based Learning
Collaborative

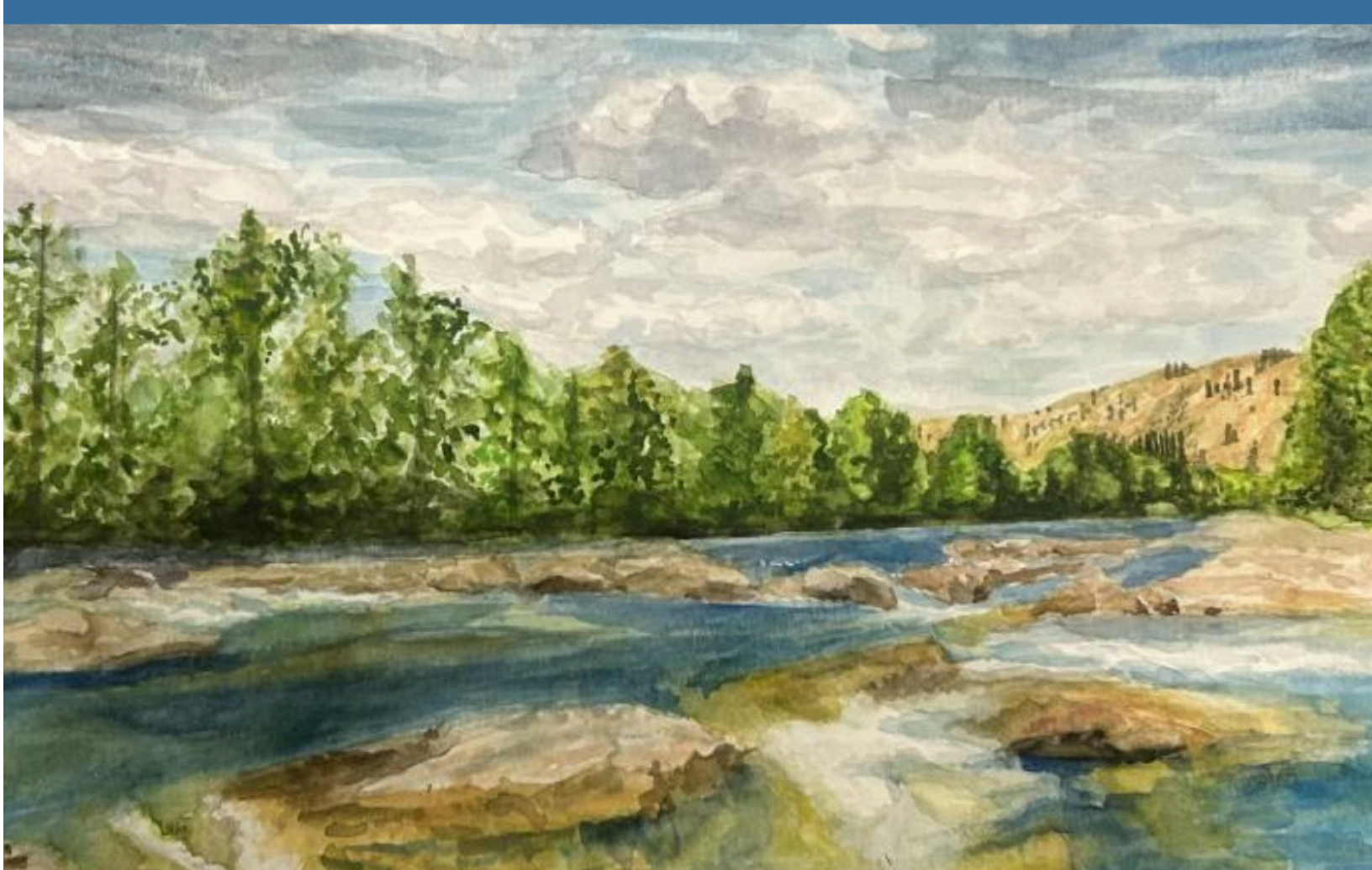# Evaluation Report:
Cohort 1 Year 4

Prepared For :

Washington State Board of Education

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Acknowledgements

About FullScale

FullScale is the merged entity of Aurora Institute and The Learning Accelerator. Fullscale is a national nonprofit with both a mandate and a track record of uniting education leaders and organizations to drive collective learning, action, and systems transformation. With a national and global view of education innovation, FullScale works on systems change in K-12 education, promotes best practices, examines policy barriers, and makes recommendations for change to yield improved outcomes for students. FullScale envisions a world in which all people are empowered to attain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to achieve success, contribute to their communities, and advance society.

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Executive Summary

Initiated in 2021, Washington's Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative (MBLC) is a statewide demonstration project led by the Washington State Board of Education in partnership with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Professional Educator Standards Board. With nearly 50 schools spanning diverse sizes, demographics, and governance models shifting toward deeper culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning[1] (CRS MBL), the MBLC's goals are to understand the following to guide future policy:

- the characteristics of high-quality CRS MBL
- how long it takes to transform systems
- what resources and support are needed

As a systems-change approach, CRS MBL embodies a deep commitment to equity, ensuring that systems and structures are intentionally designed to provide every learner with what they need, when they need it. As a pedagogical model, instructional practices promote student agency, meaningful assessments, responsive pacing, and mastery rather than seat time. Thus, mastery-based approaches have the potential to positively influence student engagement (Ahigian & Lacireno-Paquet, 2024) and academic development (Evans, Landl, & Thompson, 2020; Steele et al., 2014); although, overall findings remain mixed. It also has the potential for broader impact. When learners are affirmed in their identities and cultural and linguistic traditions, they grow in their sense of belonging (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Further, when students are exposed to diverse perspectives and inclusive learning environments they engage at higher levels, think more critically, and demonstrate greater empathy toward others (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Hammond, 2015).

MBLC Theory of Action

The MBLC theory of action centers on developing a shared vision for CRS MBL and strengthening the planning and sustainability of its implementation through a deliberate and coherent sequence. The intended outcomes of this work are:

- improved student engagement
- improved learning outcomes
- equitable access to learning opportunities

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[1] Mastery-based learning and competency-based learning are used interchangeably throughout this report to represent the same set of structures and practices.

Evaluation Overview

FullScale's evaluation of the first cohort's Year 4 implementation included **22 schools**, **65 school leaders**, **over 300 teachers** (~47% of Cohort 1's teacher workforce), and **more than 5,000 students** (~65% of Cohort 1 middle and high school enrollment), along with Washington state leaders and its technical assistance provider (Great Schools Partnerships). The study explored participants' perceived:

- benefits of MBLC participation
- changes in educator practice
- quality and level of mastery-based learning implementation
- conditions that supported or impeded progress
- impacts on learning and learning environments, such as engagement, teacher-student relationships, and agentic thinking, openness to diversity, and teamwork (habits of success)

Using a mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), quantitative and qualitative analyses triangulated school leader, teacher, and student self-reported data about school conditions and teaching and learning experiences. We employed basic descriptive statistics to explore patterns and regression analyses to investigate the relationship between implementation level and early student outcomes, with relevant student and school control variables. It is important to note that results of these analyses are correlational, not causal. They are not intended to attribute change in educator practices and student outcomes directly to MBLC participation. Also, caution should be taken when generalizing conclusions of this research to Washington schools more broadly, as it does not include a representative sample of Washington schools.

Key Findings

Cohort 1 advanced its implementation of several areas of CRS MBL, building educator capacity, expanding the use of student-centered practices, and strengthening instructional alignment. **Schools with a high level of CRS MBL implementation tended to also have stronger perceived student-teacher relationships and student engagement.** These findings reflect a growing foundation for systemic transformation. At the same time, opportunities remain to **more fully integrate** culturally responsive-sustaining practices, increase opportunities for student agency and flexibility in personalization and pacing, and address conditions that challenge implementation quality.

Commitment and Readiness: Growing

The evaluation explored teacher support for CRS MBL and leadership readiness as important precursors to successful implementation. Four themes emerged. First, **teachers are generally committed to their school's vision for expanding CRS MBL.** Further, MBLC investments in professional learning and coaching helped build local capacity. Yet, culturally responsive-sustaining education remains vulnerable to external pressures, underscoring the need for ongoing support and reinforcement of state and local commitments. The following provides more insight into these themes:

1. **Teachers support their school's plan to progressively deepen CRS MBL**: Cohort-wide, nearly 75% of teachers support their school's plan to implement CRSE and MBL at progressively deeper levels over the next several years. **In high-implementation schools, teachers universally backed their school's plan to implement MBL** (92% agree or strongly agree), compared to about 70% in low- and moderate-implementation schools. **The contrast was even sharper for culturally responsive-sustaining education**: 97% of teachers in high-implementation schools expressed support, while support dropped to about 67% in low- and moderate-implementation schools.

2. **Teachers and leaders grew in readiness to implement CRS MBL**: After significant investments in professional learning and coaching support, by Year 4, 77% of teachers felt prepared to implement MBL (up from earlier years), while 68% felt prepared for culturally responsive-sustaining education. Leader preparedness also rose, with 83% ready to lead MBL and 70% ready to lead culturally responsive-sustaining education.

3. **Teachers' access to targeted CRS MBL professional learning expanded at different rates**: Access to MBL-focused opportunities grew substantially, with fewer teachers reporting little or no training; CRS-related opportunities also increased, though at a slower pace.

4. **Context mattered**: Local political climates and shifts in national policies around equity influenced CRS education engagement, highlighting the importance of strong local leadership and sustained support.

Competencies: Emerging, Not Fully Implemented

Cohort 1 schools reported statistically and meaningfully significant progress in organizing learning around competencies (effect size, f, = .22). After early gains in Year 2, momentum stalled in Year 3 as more schools reported remaining in the planning stage. By Year 4, however, progress rebounded: 34% of schools reported being in the intermediate stage and 19% fully organized learning around competencies, while only 3% reported no plans at all.

CRS MBL: Emerging, Not Fully Implemented

The evaluation also explored schools' self-reported level of implementation. For context, Cohort 1 schools entered the MBLC at varying starting points, with most self-assessing in the early stages of building equitable systems and CRSE practices, and few having a fully developed equity stance or shared vision for equity. Most schools were piloting or building capacity for MBL rather than operating established schoolwide systems in Year 1. Again, four themes stand out, showing that MBLC schools are making meaningful progress but remain in the early stages of a long-term transformation. Sustained investment in leadership, professional learning, and equity-centered practices will be key to deepening and scaling CRS MBL statewide:

1. **Implementation progress was gradual but uneven**: By Year 4, school implementation spanned the full continuum from early to advancing, with many still in the early stages.

2. **School size mattered**: Micro-sized or tiny schools serving up to 50 students per grade tended to demonstrate a high level of CRS MBL implementation. Larger schools faced greater challenges with consistency and coherence, resulting in a low level of implementation.

3. **Equity stance shaped trajectories**: Schools with stronger commitments to equity at baseline were more likely to sustain and deepen CRS MBL over time.

4. **Teacher variation within schools remained high**: Teachers differed widely in classroom implementation, underscoring the need for professional learning, shared competencies, and system-wide accountability.

CRSE and MBL Instructional Practices: Emerging, Not Fully Implemented

The following findings highlight how educators are progressing in their efforts to implement CRS MBL instructional practices. Specifically, they demonstrate early movement from teaching *to* students toward learning *with* students, but uneven agency, feedback systems, and pacing constraints hinder equity. Strengthening formative routines, shared expectations for authentic assessment, and structures for flexible pacing are critical to realizing CRS-aligned, mastery-based classrooms at scale.

- **Overall, student voice and agency are emerging, but classrooms remain teacher-led rather than teacher-facilitated**: We examined where the decisions lie across four dimensions of instruction:

  1. Daily classroom activities
  2. Out-of-class work
  3. How learning is demonstrated
  4. When learning is demonstrated

  While descriptive patterns suggest more shared instructional decision-making, the only statistically significant change, cohort-wide, was found in how students demonstrate learning. However, the effect size (f = .05) is small and not practically significant, suggesting how learning is demonstrated is only marginally student-led. Notably, across these dimensions of agentic learning, **teachers in high-implementation schools rarely make decisions alone.** They are far more likely to share decision-making with students and provide opportunities for students to lead decision-making in daily class activities, homework, and assessment timing and format.

- **Overall, assessment is shifting toward mastery—slowly**: Educators' assessment policies shifted toward mastery-based learning. Nearly 75% of teachers allow retakes/revisions without penalty, especially in high-implementation schools. Teachers reported an increase in the extent to which they arranged for students to receive additional learning supports during school, after school, or during the summer, based on summative assessment results, which increased (32% to 46% from Year 2 to Year 4). Still, personalized, just-in-time support based on summative assessment results remains largely dependent on teachers' capacity to make space for it during class time.

  Furthermore, the findings indicate that many students do not regularly take practice quizzes (72%), and only 29% report that teachers reteach in different ways when they do not meet a learning goal, highlighting gaps in the feedback-to-support loop. Notably, students report using teacher feedback to reflect on progress frequently, yet many experience other formative routines only "sometimes," suggesting room to deepen cycles of goal-setting, self-assessment, and timely adjustment.

- **Overall, assessment formats are diversifying, but authenticity is not yet the norm across all schools**: Teachers increased their use of project-based learning. In high-implementation schools, particularly, 70% of teachers use performance-based assessments consistently, while 82% rarely rely on traditional tests. However, across the cohort, only 37% of students report *often* showing learning by applying it to real-world tasks. Implementation hurdles (clear expectations for collaboration, routines, and accountability) may be key roadblocks to performance-based assessment reliability and scale.

- **Overall, personalization, pacing, and mastery-based progression remain uneven**: The most pronounced growth in teachers' practice was in personalization of learning. Teacher mean scores increased from 3.36 in Year 2 to 3.77 in Year 4, with significant differences between Years 2 and 4 (p < .01) and between Years 3 and 4 (p < .01). Although the effect size was small-to-medium, this represents a consistent upward trend in responsive instructional practices. Nearly half (47%) of students surveyed said their classmates are only *sometimes* working on different things; 35% feel they can take more time without penalty. About 68% of students said they rarely move ahead or go deeper upon mastering content. However, educators report some qualitative improvements in this dimension of practice: *"I noticed that EL students and SPED students are not holding back the peers who master the material more quickly. I also notice that the more able students can access the level 4 mastery piece more often."* - High School Teacher

MBLC Core Benefits and Student Outcomes: Emerging, Not Fully Realized

Beyond documenting shifts in practice, it is equally important to understand the benefits and outcomes that students experienced as schools deepened their CRS MBL practices. Drawing on surveys, interviews, and student focus groups, we found that Cohort 1 schools reported tangible, quantitative, and qualitative improvements in engagement, belonging, and instructional clarity (i.e., learning goals and grading), alongside early signs of broader systemic change. **These benefits were most evident in schools with a higher level of implementation**, where students described stronger relationships with teachers and stronger cognitive engagement. The following are key takeaways:

Higher levels of implementation are associated with more positive learning and social experiences. Students in high-implementation schools reported:

- **Higher cognitive engagement** than peers in low-implementation schools (+0.23 of a standard deviations; significant after control variables).

- **Stronger teacher–student relationships** (+0.59 of a standard deviation; the most considerable effect observed; significant vs. both low and moderate).

- **Students of color** mirror the full sample in terms of engagement and student-teacher relationships. There were no differences between these students and the results for the overall sample cited above.

Habits of Success (i.e., agentic thinking, teamwork, and cultural openness) did not yield statistically significant associations with implementation level, likely requiring more time and targeted strategies to detect.

Altogether, these findings suggest that **the benefits of MBLC participation are tangible and visible, particularly when culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning implementation is more deeply integrated, especially in terms of student engagement and student–teacher relationships**, key precursors to academic success. Additionally, variation across student groups, classrooms, and schools highlights the need to strengthen coherence, expand formative routines and feedback-to-support systems, and scale authentic, culturally relevant learning so that every student experiences the promise of CRS MBL.

Enabling Conditions and Barriers to Implementation

A combination of enabling conditions and persistent barriers shaped schools' progress in implementing CRS MBL. Where strong equity foundations, supportive leadership, and collaborative cultures were in place, schools built momentum and coherence more easily. Tools, coaching, and community partnerships further accelerated implementation. Yet challenges—such as limited time, staffing shortages, inconsistent buy-in, and structural misalignments—often slowed or fragmented the work. The following highlights summarize the most significant enabling conditions and barriers reported by Cohort 1 schools.

Key Enabling Conditions

Equity-centered foundations: Smaller schools, particularly alternative and credit-recovery schools, entered with a strong foundation for CRS MBL implementation based on their self studies. Their advisory systems, inclusive practices, and student voice platforms were reinforced by positive behavioral interventions and inclusion models, which strengthened learning community relationships and advanced equitable practices.

The evaluation also found that **schools with a higher percentage of students with disabilities tended to have higher student perceptions of CRSE-aligned teaching practices** (β = 0.007, p < .05). While the effect size was negligible in magnitude, the direction of the relationship aligns with qualitative evidence suggesting that inclusive pedagogical structures contribute to stronger perceptions of culturally sustaining practice.

Leadership, staff culture, and school structures and systems: Leaders who communicated a clear vision, encouraged innovation among their staff, and prioritized coaching fostered growth. Also, smaller, "close-knit" staff reported easier coordination of implementation. Hiring the "right" people was also perceived as an important asset to implementation. Schools emphasized the need for educators who were already student-centered and equity-minded or, at the very least, open to new approaches. Moreover, a collaborative staff culture that prioritized routine co-planning was important to advanced implementation, in addition to smaller class sizes, flexible schedules, and standards-based grading created stronger foundations.

Broader community support and collective commitment: MBLC participation seemed to foster stronger community ties in some cases and a school culture of community and belonging in others. Parents, students, and local partners reinforced schools' efforts, from hosting community cafés to mentoring students through internships and applied projects. This collective commitment created a sense of belonging and provided the foundation for steady progress in mastery-based learning.

Key Implementation Barriers

Time, capacity, and staffing: Limited time for implementation, heavy preparation loads, and turnover slowed implementation and strained the potential for sustainability in some cases. One educator shared: *"Again, I just haven't had enough time to develop more meaningful assessments that connect the curriculum and the standards. I also have not had enough time to provide options for students to choose from and direct their own learning. We have added a science class that moves at a faster pace for a small group to select to take as an 8th grader."* – Middle School Science Teacher

Another educator said, *"I feel like last year we really started to see some impact of using an MBL approach. That being said, this year has been really really hard, and we are struggling to move forward. Lack of staff and resources have been a big issue."* – High School Math Teacher

Cultural and mindset barriers: Inconsistent buy-in, reliance on traditional practices, and students' challenges with adjusting to more autonomy were highlighted as factors that impeded implementation. One educator's reflections exemplified the teacher mindset challenge: *"I believe that MBLC should be used by those that struggle to connect with kids and have a tendency to make things black/white. Veteran teachers with a knack for connecting with students feel as though jumping through the hoops of MBLC is kind of insulting. I pride myself in understanding all facets of the kiddos I teach (backgrounds, socio-economic, culture, etc). I don't need rubrics to make my learning more valuable."* – Middle School Math Teacher

While this perspective highlights real concerns about professional autonomy and respect for veteran practice, it also underscores the importance of clear communication about the purpose of mastery-based learning. Many educators reported that **when mastery-based practices are framed as tools for equity and student agency, they can complement rather than diminish teachers' professional expertise.**

Leadership and system alignment: Weak or inconsistent vision, district misalignment, and competing priorities undercut coherence school implementation in some cases.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

Research on large-scale instructional and equity-centered reforms suggests that deep and sustained change often requires five to ten years to reach maturity (Fullan, 2007; Bryk et al., 2015). However, the reality is that many transformation arcs are abandoned before their intended benefits are realized. To sustain momentum and accelerate progress, Washington can strengthen

capacity-building, provide consistent support, and address the systemic barriers that hinder implementation. The following recommendations build upon the insights from the Cohort 1 evaluation.

Continue investing in CRS MBL capacity-building.

We found substantial evidence through this evaluation that suggests students, regardless of their background, demonstrate increased engagement when exposed to diverse perspectives and inclusive learning environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Hammond, 2015). However, there is an opportunity to continue building educators' confidence to do this work. Specifically, the evaluation found that by Year 4, only 68% felt prepared for CRSE, progress that depends on ongoing professional learning and coaching. In light of this, we recommend the state:

- Maintain and expand support for professional learning, coaching, and site visits that strengthen schools' capacity to implement equity-focused, student-centered practices.

- Ensure access to subject-specific professional learning and advanced training on competencies, progressions, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

- Expand regional communities of practice through Education Service Districts and peer networks so educators can learn from each other in context.

Ensure all students have structured, personalized, just-in-time supports during the school day.

The evaluation found that few schools offered structured opportunities for personalized support, such as enrichment periods or writing/math centers, instead relying on individual teachers' formative feedback and assistance, which is likely to vary considerably from classroom to classroom. Moreover, less than 50% of teachers say they arrange for students to receive additional learning supports during school, after school, or during the summer based on summative assessment results, **suggesting the likelihood that some students are moving on without demonstrating mastery**, especially given that schools have not fully organized learning around competencies. Structured supports like "What I Need" (WIN) time (see Massachusett's Mendon-Upton Regional School District's[2] example), flex periods at the middle and high school levels, and tutoring centers (often provided at the postsecondary level) are critical mechanisms for translating assessment results into action and ensuring that *all* students have consistent access to help to reach mastery without having to stay after school.

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[2] https://practices.learningaccelerator.org/strategies/what-i-need-win-block

Some Cohort 1 schools that have attempted to implement flexible schedules have encountered real barriers. One principal explained that staff resisted daily flex time, preferring to use their full class periods for reteaching and retakes. Others pointed to state seat-time requirements, attendance rules, and teacher contract limits on additional "preps" as barriers to running flex periods equitably. Without policy clarity, staff resistance is often a rational response to regulatory ambiguity that threatens instructional quality, scheduling coherence, or teachers' contractual and licensure and certification requirements. In light of this, we offer these considerations:

- Clarify and modernize state definitions of instructional time, seat-time, and teacher certification requirements (e.g., reconciling 50-minute block rules, attendance expectations, and credit logic) so districts can pilot flex periods, advisory time, and enrichment blocks without triggering compliance violations or staffing overload.

- Resource enrichment periods, flex blocks, and tutoring centers that provide timely help to students when they need it and access to deeper learning pathways (independent studies, project-based learning) so students who demonstrate mastery are not held back by rigid pacing. Encourage a menu of models (e.g., WIN time, embedded tutoring centers, advisory periods) rather than a one-size-fits-all flex block so that schools can adapt structures to their size, staffing, and student needs. Consider a gradual implementation, starting with a grade level or a subject before expanding across the whole school to build buy-in and refine the logistics.

- Provide planning grants and technical assistance to help schools redesign schedules in ways that minimize teacher burden, avoid down time for students who demonstrate mastery ahead of their peers, and ensure equitable access to support and enrichment.

- As educators increasingly turn to AI to aid them in meeting the personalized needs of diverse learners at scale, they will need guidance. Therefore, we recommend building on Washington's existing Human-Centered AI guidance by creating approval pathways for adaptive learning platforms and AI tools that explicitly align with CRS MBL, giving districts clarity on which tools are research-based, equity-centered, and interoperable with state systems. With technology evolving so rapidly, the U.S. Department of Education has cautioned that local leaders cannot reasonably be expected to evaluate AI tools against shifting criteria for privacy, bias, transparency, and accountability on their own. This underscores the need for state-level guidelines and guardrails tailored to education, so districts have clarity and support when making adoption decisions (U.S. Department of Education, 2023), which leads us to our next key point under the broader recommendation.

- Strengthen safeguards around privacy, bias monitoring, and accessibility so that AI adoption reinforces, not undermines, culturally responsive practices. More specifically, state guidance should ensure that students' ways of knowing, communicating, and expressing identity—often rooted in cultural and linguistic traditions—are not erased or misrepresented by generative AI systems (Agarwal, Naaman, & Vashistha, 2025).

Enable comprehensive high schools to redesign schedules for personalization and student success.

Expanding access to structured supports, such as flex periods and tutoring centers, depends in part on schools' ability to reorganize time within the school day. Yet many schools, particularly large, comprehensive high schools, identified scheduling constraints as a significant barrier to implementing these kinds of personalized supports, as well as to fostering collaboration and advisory structures more broadly. In contrast, smaller schools advanced their implementation more deeply, benefiting from flexible structures that supported advisories, collaboration, and personalized pacing.

Yet, culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning cannot remain limited to small schools. It must be scalable to the comprehensive high schools that serve the majority of Washington's students. Redesigning schedules is, therefore, not just a logistical challenge but a necessary equity strategy to ensure CRS MBL is viable statewide. As such, we recommend the following actions:

- Provide technical assistance, planning grants, and case studies to help schools pilot alternative schedules (e.g., block scheduling, trimesters, or flex days).

- Highlight successful case studies to show what schedule redesign looks like in practice within large, comprehensive high schools (see Lindsay Unified School District's Lindsay High School[3] example).

Strengthen assessment systems to support mastery and authentic learning.

The evaluation found that in high-implementation schools, 70% of teachers consistently use performance-based assessments, while 82% rarely rely on traditional tests. However, across the remainder of the cohort, when asked to report how frequently students show what they have learned by applying it (like to a project or real-world situation) summatively, only 37% indicated they do this in their classrooms *"most of the time"* or *"always."* Just about the same percentage (34%) reported they do this *"sometimes."* Furthermore, there are real barriers hindering progress in assessment development in this area of practice. Washington is not alone in this challenge.

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[3] https://practices.learningaccelerator.org/strategies/additional-individual-personalized-learning-time

Across the nation, states and networks have worked to innovate their assessment systems with performance-based assessments that enable students to demonstrate mastery through application, problem-solving, and authentic tasks. New Hampshire's Performance Assessment of Competency Education pilot (2019) showed that when states provide common rubrics, scoring protocols, and technical assistance, locally-developed performance-based assessments can serve as a credible alternative to traditional tests while supporting learning. While the state's support was relatively short-lived and it eventually returned to a traditional state testing model, the work it catalyzed at the district level continues with the New Hampshire Learning Initiative's Performance Learning and Assessment Consortium. The New York Performance Standards Consortium (2021) is another example of an alternative approach to high-stakes standardized testing. NYPSC reports that its model of authentic performance assessments yielded higher graduation rates, stronger college outcomes, and more equitable learning environments, while fostering professional growth among teachers. Building on these lessons, Washington can strengthen its own assessment systems in ways that both build leadership and teacher capacity and promote more coherent, authentic, and valid demonstrations of mastery. We recommend the following:

- Strengthen the quality of Washington's Performance-based Pathways policy adoption and, more broadly, authentic assessments of learning by providing educators guidance and support to develop empirically valid and comparable local performance-based measures of learning that are well-aligned with CRS MBL principles (e.g., meaningful and grounded in students' funds of cultural knowledge). One approach may be to provide grants for technical assistance to deepen practitioners' assessment literacy or funding for districts to pilot and validate performance-based assessments across in-school and out-of-school learning experiences with a technical assistant.

- Co-design with educators, state-level guidance and exemplars that show how performance tasks can be implemented reliably and connected to academic standards and Portraits of a Graduate. The voices of students and their families should be included to ensure broad alignment with stakeholders' educational values. Such a co-design process will not only help lift the burden for teachers, but also provide a playbook that can lead to more coherent performance assessment practices.

- Resource professional learning and coaching for teachers to build strong feedback loops (reteaching in different ways, goal-setting, and student self-assessment) into instruction so students consistently connect assessment to growth.

Expand leadership development and teacher leadership opportunities.
Cohort 1 schools with stable, equity-focused leadership were far more likely to sustain progress. However, 57% had been leading at their current school for **less than** four years. In Year 4, 83% of leaders felt prepared to guide MBL, but only 70% felt prepared to lead CRSE. This gap matters: without strong and well-prepared leaders, implementation often stalls when key staff turn over, district priorities shift, or resistance emerges. Moreover, leadership development cannot be confined to principals alone. Distributed leadership is important for fostering shared ownership across teaching staff. Expanding leadership capacity at multiple levels is therefore not just a professional learning priority but a system safeguard to protect equity-centered transformation from fragmentation and regression.

- Invest in principal and teacher leader development focused on aligning systems (pedagogy and assessment, grading, schedules, LMS, professional learning) with CRS MBL.

- Provide training in CRSE leadership, including cultural competence, navigating resistance, and guiding adaptive change.

- Offer stipends, fellowships, and other meaningful incentives for educators who are leading innovation CRS MBL implementation with technology and integrating student voice in instructional design.

Expand schools' access to targeted professional learning and strategic implementation planning by providing ongoing access to high-quality professional learning.
The evaluation found that as access to CRS MBL professional learning resources and experiences increased, some schools reported schoolwide shifts in practice. However, cohort-wide, fewer than 40% of teachers reported that learning and assessment had become more culturally responsive, indicating a real need for more targeted professional learning and practice support. Teachers asked for concrete resources (*"Provide the curriculum if you want us to teach a class at multiple levels"*), practical models (*"We need more videos to show how this has helped in schools"*), and greater emphasis on CRSE in PD (*"We focus so much on MBL… we need more on CRSE"*). These reflections underscore that professional learning must be:

- anchored in a clear vision
- supported with usable tools
- structured to reduce teacher burden

Such opportunities must also be differentiated, adaptive, and designed to support schools and educators at different stages of implementation. To increase effectiveness, professional learning should address a wide range of needs, including:

- foundational knowledge
- advanced instructional design
- development of competency and learning progressions (which should be a district- or school-wide effort rather than an individual teacher's responsibility)
- practice refinement

Further, we recommend these additional actions:

- Invest in regional communities of practice hubs, through ESDs or MBLC peer networks, to provide ongoing CRS MBL development and opportunities for collaboration that respond to each school's local context.

- Invest in school leadership development focused on aligning systems (scheduling, grading, professional learning, LMS, etc.) to support whole-school transformation.

- Pilot modularized adaptive learning pathways that enable educators to self-assess and, based on the results, choose or be matched with professional learning resources and opportunities tailored to their role, experience level, school type (e.g., CTE/vocational, traditional, Open Doors, etc.), or school's implementation stage.

- Continue or expand MBLC-type funding (mini-grants) that enable schools to hire consultants, participate in site visits, or support internal professional learning and coaching aligned with their local needs.

- Enhance existing CRSE guidance by incorporating practical lesson examples and strategies, particularly in the area of critical consciousness, where a significant pedagogical gap exists.

Pair principal and educator accountability with meaningful incentives.
Teachers emphasized the need for clear expectations paired with recognition; without accountability, "a culture of avoidance" can take hold. At the same time, compliance alone will not sustain change. In Year 4, many educators reported uneven buy-in across colleagues, with some reverting to traditional practices. Embedding CRS MBL into evaluation systems, such as TPEP, can establish consistent expectations statewide. Pairing accountability with incentives and genuine co-design encourages genuine commitment and reduces resistance. This balance ensures that accountability drives improvement rather than fear, while incentives reward the innovation and persistence needed to make CRS MBL succeed. Therefore, we recommend the following:

- Integrate CRS MBL practices into principal and teacher evaluation systems like TPEP, using them to spark reflection, identify supports, and reinforce alignment with state goals.

- Co-design accountability expectations with leaders and educators to ensure they are realistic, growth-oriented, and grounded in school and classroom realities.

- Couple expectations with incentives, such as release time, recognition, and leadership opportunities, for teachers advancing this work. Access to subs, in particular, could lead to opportunities to observe colleagues and collaborate instead of trying to balance normal class loads while also building and integrating new models.

Build a coherent data infrastructure to guide continuous improvement.
One of the often-overlooked successes of the MBLC's work has been the data it has amassed across SBE, schools, and partners. This growing body of evidence, spanning educator surveys, student experiences, implementation self-assessments, and coaching documentation, offers powerful insights into what drives meaningful progress in culturally responsive-sustaining, mastery-based learning. To build on this momentum, we recommend that Washington invest in a more robust and coherent data infrastructure to support local and state-level decision-making. Doing so will support future longitudinal studies of implementation progress and impact that will offer visibility into not only the sustainability of this work but also the return on the State's investment. Therefore, we recommend the following:

- Establish shared indicators and progress monitoring tools aligned with CRS MBL principles to track implementation across schools and districts.

- Provide training and tools that help school and district leaders interpret and use implementation and outcomes data to inform continuous improvement.

- Align learning management systems, grading platforms, and performance tracking tools with CRS MBL practices to support real-time, actionable data use by educators.

- Strengthen collaborations between state leaders, schools, research institutions and non-profits to continue refining and learning from the data generated by MBLC and similar initiatives.

- Continue to gather and monitor shifts in student perceptions of school safety and welcoming and affirming environments by demographic group.

Conclusion

Systems change takes time (Fixsen et al., 2005). As one educator noted, even well-intentioned district reforms "hit hard" one year and then disappear the next, leaving schools to decide which principles to carry forward. The MBLC Initiative represents a firm commitment from Washington's

leaders and educators to test a model that holds potential for creating more equitable learning conditions, opportunities, and outcomes for learners.

Culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It reflects both evidence-informed principles and best practice adapted to local conditions. We have been careful to consider as many factors that contribute to variation in implementation and outcomes as possible. However, it is unlikely that we have captured all of the important nuances that make this work so impactful and challenging. Therefore, these findings should be taken as a provocation for increased investment in and studies of the incredible shifts toward more equitable and academically enriched learning environments that are taking place in Washington's schools.

Introduction

Education reform and innovation have long sought to redefine the school experience for young people (Spillane et al., 2022). Progress toward equitable access to impactful learning and whole-child support has been marked by hopeful starts and far too frequent setbacks. Today, as many learners continue to be denied access to the type of education and services they need to thrive, the field faces a critical question: how will we finally deliver on the promise of high-quality public education for every child in every community?

Washington State has actively grappled with this challenge, working to design a public education system that meets the needs of an increasingly culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse student population (Sattin-Bajaj, Boix-Mansilla, & Strom, 2020). For example, over seven percent of the state's total population is foreign-born and does not hold U.S. citizenship (Census, 2020), underscoring the need for schools that are inclusive and responsive to immigrant families navigating complex social dynamics. Twelve percent of Washington's children under 18 live in poverty, adding economic instability to the educational hurdles many encounter in schools, especially at under-resourced schools. Also, the state's deep history with Native communities, including the legacy of harmful federal and state policies, makes implementation of equity-centered approaches to teaching and learning all the more urgent. In light of this context, advancing student-centered approaches is essential for building effective educational systems (OSPI, 2022; Brookings, 2024).

The demands of the workforce further reinforce the urgency of this work. A 2024 survey of Washington businesses across multiple sectors found that 51% of employers reported the lack of qualified workers as the most significant challenge facing their businesses (Association of Washington Business, 2024). Employers increasingly value diversity, adaptability, and cultural competence as drivers of innovation, collaboration, and long-term economic success. Preparing students to thrive in meaningful jobs, therefore, requires education systems that nurture learners' identities, strengths, and lived experiences while providing them with opportunities to develop transferable knowledge and skills through pathways that are also relevant to the local and broader workforce.

Washington State's Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative (MBLC), initiated in 2021 and led by the Washington State Board of Education (SBE) with joint executive sponsorship from SBE, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB), is a demonstration project taking place in almost 50 schools to support the implementation of mastery-based learning (MBL) and culturally responsive and sustaining education (CRSE). These schools represent a range of sizes, student racial and ethnic demographics, and geographic locations. They also encompass a range of governance structures, including charter public schools, traditional public schools, vocational-technical schools, and alternative schools. As part

of the initiative, each school receives dedicated funding and participates in professional learning, implementation coaching, and a statewide network.

The MBLC's primary goal is to help leaders and practitioners understand the characteristics of quality mastery-based learning, how long implementation takes, and what resources are needed to inform future policies. However, its guiding star is to develop local learning systems that serve every learner effectively. The initiative seeks to challenge the traditional, one-size-fits-all industrial education model, which has proven ineffective for many young people. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing the unique experiences and needs of racially and linguistically diverse learners, as well as those with multiple identities often underserved in education, such as individuals with disabilities, who come from various income backgrounds, or hold identities that differ from societal norms. By doing so, the initiative demonstrates how reshaping conditions, structures, and practices to center the multifaceted experiences of all children, in highly contextualized ways, can positively impact their learning and development.

MBLC Frameworks

The MBLC is based on a conceptual framework that deliberately connects CRSE and MBL to ensure that the rich histories, identities, and languages of Washington's students are intentionally woven into interdisciplinary, mastery-based learning. The expectation is that doing so will enrich the development of all students' academic knowledge and skills, as well as their cultural competence, mindsets, and behaviors.

In 2019, the state adopted the following mastery-based learning framework (Sturgis, Patrick, & Pittenger, 2011) that guides the MBLC work:

1. Students advance upon demonstrated mastery of content.

2. Competencies include explicit, measurable, transferable learning objectives that empower students.

3. Assessments are meaningful and a positive learning experience for students.

4. Students receive rapid, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.

5. Learning outcomes emphasize competencies that include the application and creation of knowledge along with the development of important skills and dispositions.

The recent passage of SB 5189 in 2025 expands that framework (Levine & Patrick , 2019) as follows:

1. Students are empowered[4] daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.

2. Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.

3. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.

4. Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.

5. Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.

6. Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.

7. Rigorous, common expectations for learning, including knowledge, skills, and dispositions, are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable.

The MBLC has chosen to augment its focus on mastery-based learning with an emphasis on CRSE as a result of recommendations from Washington's Mastery-Based Learning Work Group, which the state legislature enlisted to provide recommendations for removing barriers and increasing capacity for MBL. The 2020 Work Group report identified CRSE as essential to address the historical and ongoing institutional racism that has underserved many students, and highlighted MBL as a strong opportunity to embed culturally sustaining practices into instruction (Muller, 2020).

The initiative's understanding of CRSE is guided by the New York State Department of Education's CRSE framework, which lays out a vision of an education system in which all students (1) experience academic success, (2) develop and maintain cultural competence, and (3) develop a critical lens through which they challenge inequitable systems of access, power, and privilege (New York State Education Department, 2018). This framework draws inspiration from Gloria Ladson-Billings' seminal work on culturally relevant pedagogy, which offers a framework for enriching the educational experiences of students who have been historically marginalized by affirming and leveraging their culture and diverse lived experiences as assets in the learning process, rather than treating them as deficits or overlooking them altogether (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach centers on three key goals: (1) academic success, (2) cultural competence, and (3) critical

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[4] The term "empowered" is used here with caution. While commonly employed in student-centered education to signal agency and voice, the word can unintentionally reinforce a hierarchical power dynamic, implying that power is granted to students by adults who often do not share the same background or lived experiences, rather than acknowledging students as inherently capable. In competency-based education, the aim is not to bestow power, but to co-create learning environments that recognize, respect, and build upon students' existing agency, identities, and lived experiences.

consciousness, encouraging students to recognize and challenge social inequities. Recognizing the potential for these goals to fall short of creating more equitable and just learning experiences in the long term, Paris (2012) suggested an expanded framing: culturally *sustaining* pedagogy. This approach not only honors students' cultural backgrounds but also seeks to uphold and reinforce their cultural and linguistic traditions through instruction.

Washington is championing CRSE and MBL practices to ultimately serve the cause of educational equity. As shown in the illustration of the seven elements of MBL, developed by the Aurora Institute in 2019, (Figure 1), equity is both an approach and an outcome of MBL. Plainly stated, "Educational equity means that every child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential" (National Equity Project, n.d.). Equity, therefore, should be "infused into the culture, systems, and pedagogy of a learning environment to produce equitable learning outcomes for each learner" (Gagnon, 2024).

Figure 1. Competency-based education/mastery-based learning framework

Source: Levine & Patrick, 2019; Gagnon, 2024

In recognition of the intentional integration of CRSE and MBL, both SBE and this evaluation will refer to the approach as culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning (CRS MBL).

Science of Learning and Development

To understand why CRS MBL holds promise for transforming educational experiences and outcomes, it is important to examine the underlying research base that informs its design. CRS MBL is grounded in a multidisciplinary body of research around the science of learning and development (SoLD), which emphasizes the need for education systems to support the whole child academically, socially, emotionally, and culturally, as shown in Figure 2. Studies across psychology, neuroscience, and education highlight that deeper and sustained learning is relational, context-dependent, and driven by relevance and engagement (Cantor et al., 2019). Thus, learning environments that are culturally responsive and sustaining create the conditions for all learners to feel a sense of belonging, affirmation, agency, and purpose (SoLD Alliance, 2020), which are key drivers of engagement and academically challenging, mastery-based learning. The MBLC and its evaluation aim to provide critical insights into the policies and practices that bring SoLD principles to life in Washington's schools and classrooms.

Figure 2. Science of learning and development principles

Supportive Environment — Promotes strong attachments and relationships, a sense of safety and belonging, and relational trust.

Productive Instructional Strategies — Connect to student experience, support conceptual understanding, and develop metacognitive abilities.

System of Supports — Enable healthy development, meet student needs, and address learning barriers.

Social and Emotional Development — Promotes the skills, habits, and mindsets that enable self-regulation, interpersonal skills, perseverance, and resilience.

Trust and connections among staff and families

Classroom learning communities

Structures for effective caring

Student-centered instruction

Conceptual understanding and motivation

Learning how to learn

Extended learning opportunities

Coordinated access to integrated services

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)

Integration of social-emotional skills

Development of mindsets

Educative and restorative behavioral supports

Whole Child
academic, cognitive, ethical, physical, psychological, social-emotional

Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2019).

While evidence is still emerging, shifts toward student-centered, mastery-based systems hold the potential to strengthen coherence between state and local mindsets, policies, and priorities and to improve student opportunities and outcomes across diverse contexts (Rickles et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2017; Cuban, 2013). Studies of CBE show potential benefits for student engagement and achievement, including two to four additional days of attendance compared to non-CBE peers (Ahigian & Lacireno-Paquet, 2024) and significantly greater gains in ELA and math on NWEA MAP assessments relative to matched comparison groups and national averages (Evans, Landl, & Thompson, 2020). Furthermore, culturally responsive and sustaining practices have been shown to benefit not only students from historically marginalized backgrounds but also high-performing students from more privileged contexts. When students, regardless of their background, are exposed to diverse perspectives and inclusive learning environments, they demonstrate increased engagement, stronger critical thinking skills, and greater empathy (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Hammond, 2015).

In light of this research base, SBE is testing a bold hypothesis that a fully realized transition to culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning will equip every learner with the competencies needed to lead and thrive in an increasingly interconnected, diverse, and dynamic social and economic landscape.

MBLC Theory of Action

The MBLC is guided by a theory of action that defines how its vision is translated into a strategy to achieve key outcomes, as illustrated in Figure 3. It posits that culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning, when supported by planning (Year 1), capacity-building (Years 1-4), and collaboration and deep implementation (Years 3 and 4), can enhance student engagement, improve outcomes, and promote more equitable educational practices and opportunities. This theory of action shaped the structure of the initiative and its evaluation design.

Figure 3. MBLC theory of action
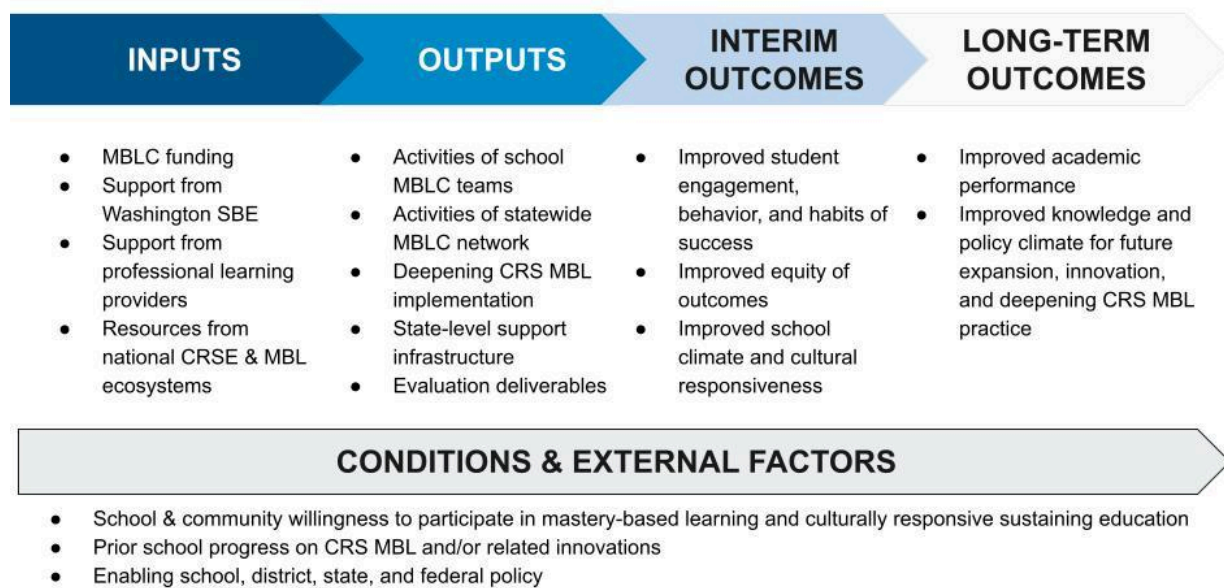
Participation in the MBLC was voluntary; districts and schools opted into the initiative by applying. Two cohorts of schools have been selected, representing Washington's diverse geographies and urbanicities (Figure 4). Cohort 1 comprises 22 schools across 13 districts, representing a diverse range of grade levels, community sizes, geographic locations, student and teacher demographics, and school types.

While participating schools represent less than 1% of Washington's total student enrollment and teacher workforce, the initiative's reach is still significant: 8,416 students and 634 educators across the state through their schools' efforts.

Figure 4. Map of Washington MBLC Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools
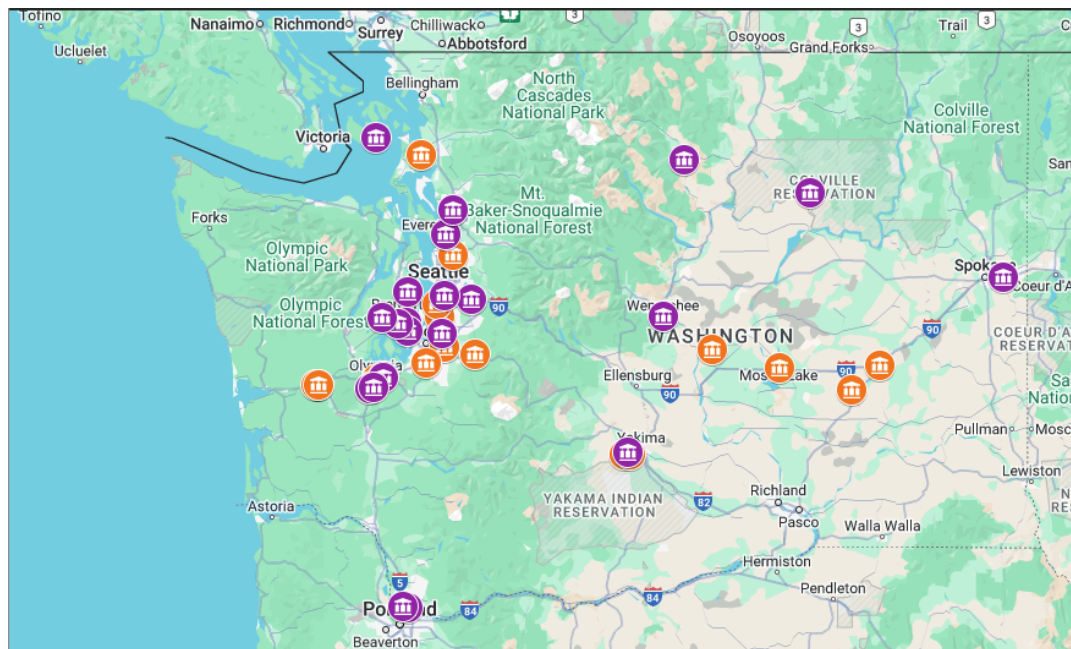
Note: MBLC Community Site. On this map, Cohort 1 schools are represented by orange icons and Cohort 2 schools are represented by purple icons.

Evaluation Overview

FullScale (the merged entity of Aurora Institute and The Learning Accelerator) conducted the MBLC evaluation on behalf of SBE. The MBLC evaluation aims to contribute to the identification of effective policies, practices, and system changes that can support the implementation of MBL and CRSE throughout Washington's K–12 education system. This report presents evaluation findings for the fourth year of Cohort 1, representing the second year of deep implementation and the final year of grant funding as schools transition off the formal funding stream. During this next phase, SBE anticipated that schools would demonstrate greater system-wide alignment, more consistent implementation of culturally responsive, sustaining, and anti-racist practices, and a maturing of mastery-based learning structures and practices than would typically be expected in the earliest stages of implementation.

While it is reasonable to anticipate signs of growth and scaling, comprehensive implementation of CRS MBL is unlikely within a three- or four-year timeframe. Research on large-scale instructional and equity-centered reforms suggests that deep and sustained change often requires five to ten years to reach maturity (Fullan, 2007; Bryk et al., 2015). Furthermore, system transformation is a developmental process that progresses in stages, ranging from the initial adoption of the transformation model to full-scale operation, innovation, and sustainability, often requiring sustained support and adaptation over time (Fixsen et al., 2005). Cohort 1 schools have undertaken work over the past four years that has focused on building, in some cases, and improving, in others, the infrastructure and capacity for school-wide or district-wide CRS MBL. As such, findings in this

report should be interpreted as indicators of progress along a longer implementation continuum rather than evidence of complete transformation. The evaluation questions were:

1. What do evaluation participants (teachers, administrators, counselors, students, the State Board of Education, and the professional learning providers) report as the MBLC's benefits for schools?
2. Was participation in the MBLC associated with changes in educator practice? Why or why not?
3. What was the quality of implementation of MBL at the selected schools?
4. What school conditions helped or impeded MBL implementation?
5. To what extent did evaluation participants report that implementation of MBL had a positive impact on learning conditions such as student engagement and school climate, cultural responsiveness, and safety? Did this differ across ages, student demographics, or other relevant factors?
6. What implementation practices or conditions contributed to the reported impacts or lack of impact?

To recap the progression of this work, Year 2 focused on the early stages of implementing the Year 1 work plan and engaging in professional learning. Its evaluation centered on establishing a baseline for understanding changes during Year 3, capturing how schools began to operationalize their plans, and identifying key areas for growth. That year's report (Levine, 2022) offered a robust set of recommendations, many of which were acted upon the following year. These included:

- "Update state policies to include the field's 2019 definition of mastery-based learning, rather than the current use of the 2011 definition." This was accomplished with the passage of SB 5189 in the spring of 2025.

- "Revise the screening process to ensure the future MBLC schools have a fuller understanding of MBL and CRSE, the complexity of what they are taking on, and typical transformation stages, elements, and timelines." SBE updated its screening process for Cohort 2 to strengthen the application and included virtual interviews with candidate MBLC school teams.

Year 3 focused on implementing school work plans. Its evaluation focused on shifts in mindsets, policies, practices, and other conditions observed between the second and third years. Again, the report (Levine, 2024) offered a set of recommendations that have since been acted upon. These included:

- "Consider requiring schools to use grant funds to support staff who will become internal CRS MBL experts and coaches. Explore strategies to incentivize this work, such as job-embedded fellowships and pathways to earn graduate-level credentials." SBE and its professional learning partner piloted an MBLC Fellows program in Year 4 designed to build

school-level expertise and coaching capacity, which we will describe in more detail in this report.

- "Increase the amount of in-person coaching." We will describe shifts in Year 4 coaching support to be responsive to this recommendation.

- "Develop a state-approved set of mastery-based competencies, learning progressions, and success criteria aligned to state standards that mastery-based schools or districts could opt into as an alternative to the existing system." Senate Bill 5189 initiates the work of developing a state-approved set of mastery-based competencies. "Recommend a process for OSPI to create competencies aligned with state learning standards, and identify the associated costs" (Washington State Legislature, 2025).

Year 4 focused on deeper implementation and the potential for sustainability. Its evaluation focused on shifts in school systems, structures, and instructional practices, as well as student outcomes and the conditions needed to deepen CRS MBL implementation. While we explore the relationships between CRS MBL implementation and conditions, as well as student outcomes, the findings are correlational and do not imply that the MBLC led to these effects. Instead, they should be used to shape hypotheses about the policies and supports needed to accelerate and sustain systems transformation through CRS MBL.

Evaluation Methods

As in previous years, we employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), collecting survey and interview data simultaneously to explore multiple dimensions of MBL and CRSE implementation. We systematically gathered data from stakeholders across Cohort 1 schools to inform the evaluation from as many perspectives as possible (Table 1) on a broad range of topics. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed independently and then merged to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence in the experiences of students, educators, and school leaders. The findings and insights gained through our statistical and qualitative analyses are integrated to elucidate patterns and bright spots in how the MBLC is advancing Washington's policies to enable more culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning across the state, as well as what additional support is needed.

Table 1. Data collection topics addressed in Cohort 1 Year 4 evaluation

Evaluation topic	Students	Teachers	School leaders	GSP	SBE
Attitudes and beliefs about CRS MBL		x	x	x	
CRS MBL teaching and learning activities	x	x	x	x	
Changes to school structures and culture		x	x	x	
Factors that support or impede progress		x	x	x	x
Professional learning experiences		x	x	x	x
Enabling or challenging school, district, and state policies		x	x		x
State structures and support activities		x	x		x
Benefits and outcomes	x	x	x		

Data collection activities took place near the end of the 2024-2025 school year. Before data collection, we collaborated with SBE on instrument development to ensure the relevance of the evaluation measures. In March 2025, we administered a survey to all teachers, school leaders, and all students in middle and high schools[5]. Additionally, in March 2025, we conducted site visits at a

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[5] While there is one elementary school in the cohort, we did not include that school in the student survey. We developed the survey instrument to include and adapt measures that have been studied with adolescents in grades 6 and above. We were not able to pilot the instrument with younger students to determine its appropriateness for use within this evaluation.

select group of schools and interviewed teachers, school leaders, and students at these sites. In addition to these school-level data collection activities, we also conducted interviews in May 2025 with representatives from the Professional Learner Provider (PLP) and SBE.

Participants

Participation in the evaluation activities was a condition of MBLC funding. With SBE support, all 22 active schools in Cohort 1[6] participated. Cohort 1 districts and schools provide a diverse sampling of Washington's geography and urbanicity (see Figure 4). Over two-thirds of participating schools (63%) are located in suburban or town contexts, while 36% are situated in a mix of city and rural contexts.

The cohort is 95% middle and high schools, with one elementary school. Over half of the schools are comprehensive (55%), 32% are alternative, and 13% are career and technical schools. School sizes varied from "micro" (less than 20 students per grade level) to "medium to large" (200-400 students per grade level). Over half (54%) of the schools are classified as "micro" or "tiny" (encompassing 20-50 students per grade level). We did not find systematic differences in size by locale, such as smaller schools being strongly associated with rural locales and larger schools being strongly related to urban locales.

We also examined other important student characteristics to understand if there might be qualitative differences among schools based on school size that should be accounted for in our analyses. First, upon observing the racial and ethnic composition, there does not appear to be any systematic differences. As shown in Figure 5, on average, White students comprise the most significant proportion of the student population (51%). Among non-White students across these schools, the typical breakdown is as follows: 31% Latino, 8% Multiracial/Biracial, 8% Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian, 4% Asian, 3% Black, and 2% Native American.

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[6] Three cohort 1 schools exited the initiative in its first year (2021-2022). One school exited in its third year (2023-2024).

Figure 5. Percentage of student racial and ethnic groups within each Cohort 1 school, by school size
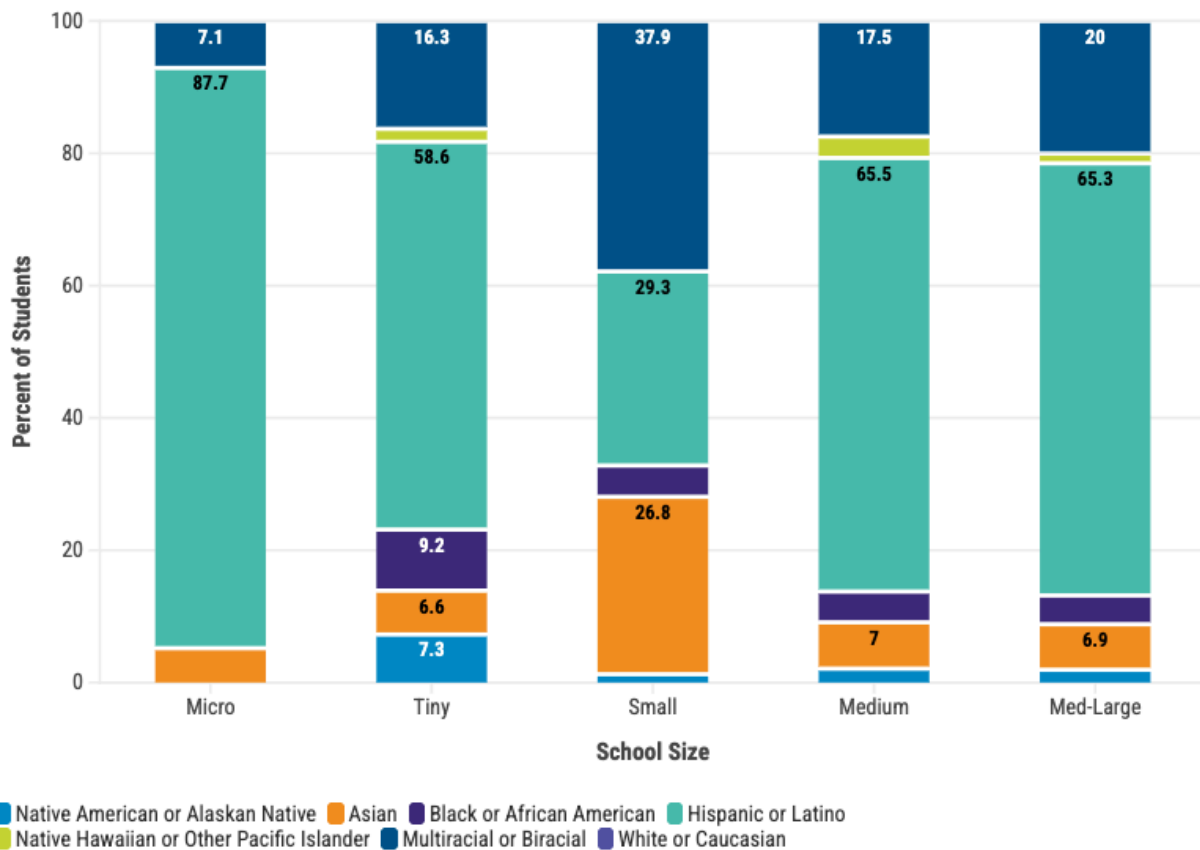
Source data: OSPI

Note. "Micro" = less than 20 students per grade level; "Tiny" = 20 to 50 students per grade level'; "Small" = 50-100 students per grade level; "Medium" = 100 to 200 students per grade level; "Medium to Large" = 200 to 400 students per grade level.

As shown in Figure 6, the teacher population in Cohort 1 schools is not representative of the student population, with 81% identifying as White, 8% as Latino, 3% Asian, and less than 4% as Black, Native American, Pacific Islander, or multiracial. Notably, the underrepresentation of teachers of color reflects broader educator workforce trends, with the majority of teachers in Washington identifying as White (81%). However, there are no clear patterns based on school size.

Figure 6. Percentage of teacher racial and ethnic groups within each Cohort 1 school by school size
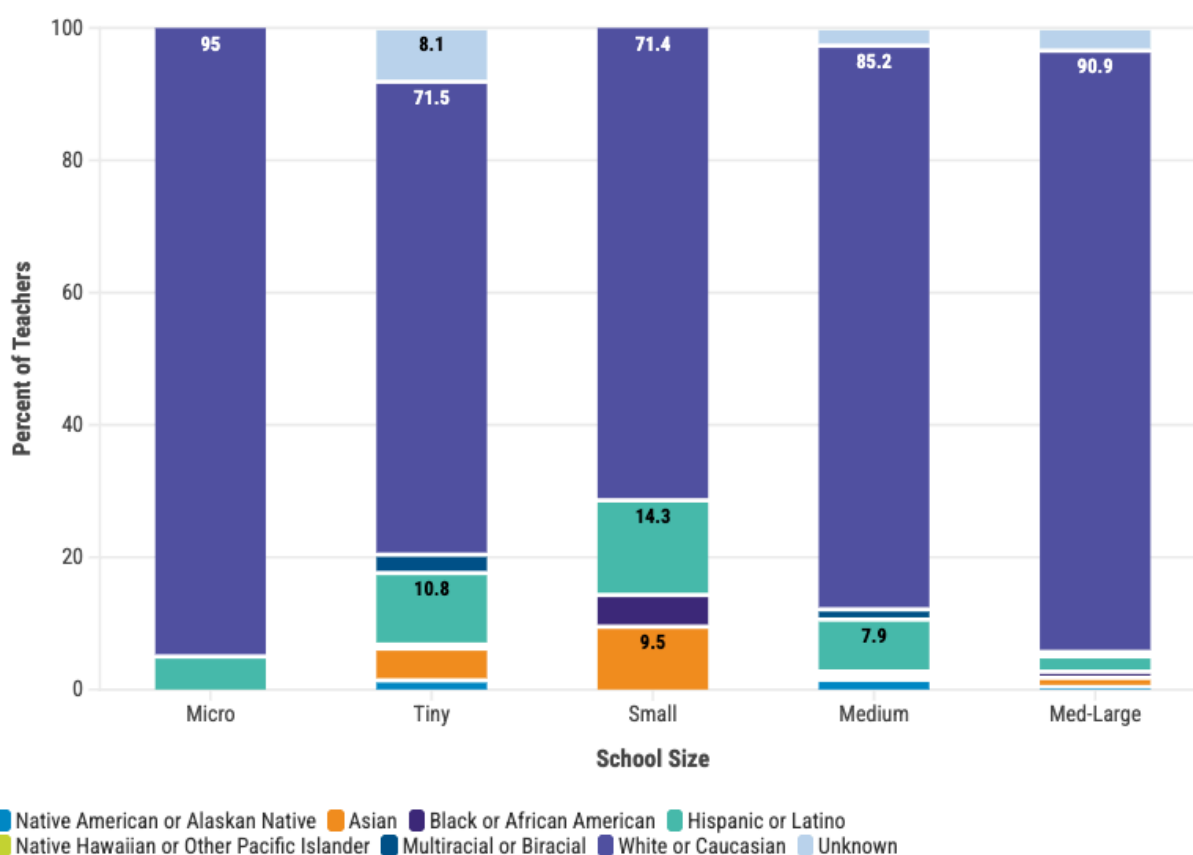
Source data: OSPI

Note. "Micro" = less than 20 students per grade level; "Tiny" = 20 to 50 students per grade level; "Small" = 50-100 students per grade level; "Medium" = 100 to 200 students per grade level; "Medium to Large" = 200 to 400 students per grade level.

We also examined the percentages of students experiencing poverty, students with disabilities, and English language learners. In addition to student race and ethnicity, these characteristics often predict differences in learning opportunities and outcomes among students. There was no discernible difference in these characteristics based on school size, although significant variability was observed in each area across the cohort.

Instruments and Procedures

Teacher and School Leader Surveys

FullScale developed teacher and school leader surveys, in collaboration with SBE staff, to address educators' knowledge and beliefs about CRS MBL, educator practices, school-level policies and practices, professional learning experiences, and observed impact on students. We maintained a high degree of consistency in survey content to ensure comparability across years and cohorts.

Very few survey items were adjusted, and those that underwent minimal changes to enhance the clarity of understanding and analysis were reviewed and approved by SBE. The surveys took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The full survey instruments can be found in the [MBLC Cohort 1 Year 4 Technical Report](#).

The teacher survey was sent to members of the learning community who directly oversee classroom instruction and assessment, including teachers and paraprofessionals. We received a list of recipient names and email addresses from school leaders midway through the school year and distributed Qualtrics surveys directly to those recipients via email. This allowed us to track responses and send reminders to any recipients who had not yet completed the survey. The survey was open in March. We sent weekly email reminders directly to recipients throughout the month; we also provided overall participation rates to school leaders, allowing them to remind their staff to take the survey.

Ultimately, responses were received from all 22 schools in Cohort 1, with a cohort-wide teacher survey completion rate of 67% and an overall school leader survey completion rate of 71%. However, there was considerable variability in response rates among schools, ranging from 33% to 100% on both surveys. There were 331 teacher responses. We present response rates for each survey at each school in the [MBLC Cohort 1 Year 4 Technical Report](#).

Teacher surveys were completed by educators who taught a range of subjects and served in student support and advisory roles (e.g., multilingual counselor, career guidance). Among the subject areas, ELA, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies were more commonly represented among teachers.

Figure 7. Teacher survey demographics: Subjects taught
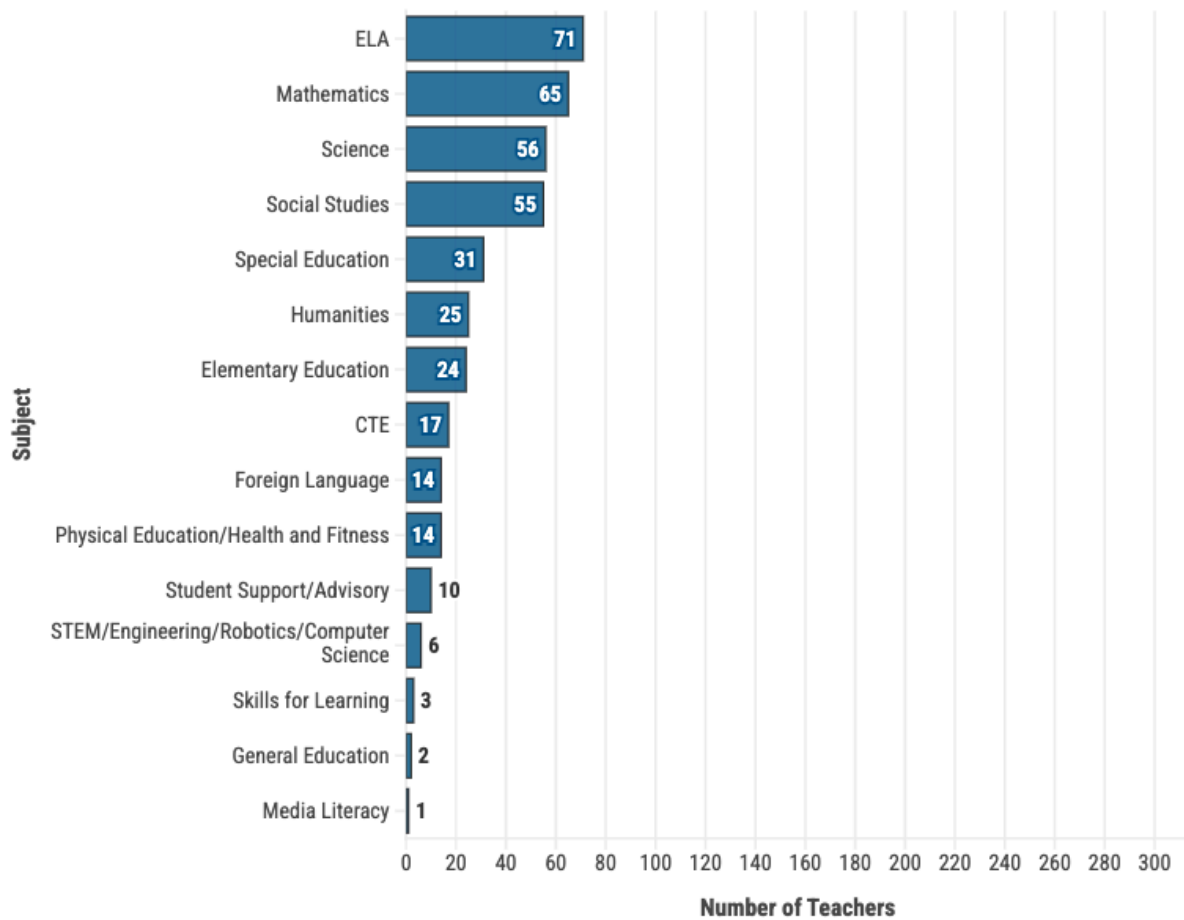
Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025
Note. N =314. Teachers could select multiple subjects.

Table 2 shows that among the 308 educators who participated in the survey, the majority (79%) reported having taught for five or more years. Smaller proportions had four to five years (7%), two to three years (10%), or less than 1 year (5%) of teaching experience. Educators' time at their current school varied more widely. Just over half (55%) had been at their current school for five or more years, while 24% had been there for two to three years, 9% for four to five years, and 12% for less than a year. This range in teaching experience should be considered when evaluating how educators perceive changes in their school's practices, their teaching practices, and student learning over time.

Table 2. Teacher survey demographics: Years of teaching experience and years at current school

	N	≤1 Year	2 to 3 Years	4 to 5 Years	5+Years
Total Years of Teaching Experience	308	5%	10%	7%	79%
Years Teaching at Current School	308	12%	24%	9%	55%

Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025
Note. Missing Responses = 6

48% Admin.   **17%** Counselor   **25%** MBLC Team Member   **11%** Other Leader
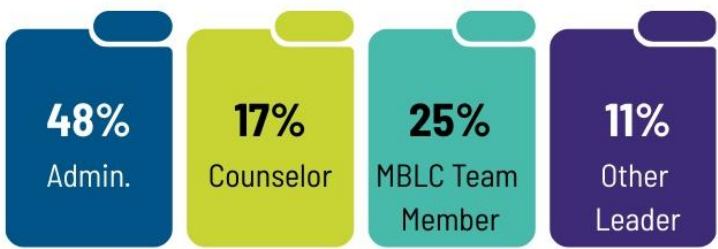
Among school leader survey participants, nearly half (48%) were administrators, while the remainder included MBLC implementation team leaders (25%), school counselors (17%), and others in leadership roles (11%).

Similar to the teaching staff, many school leaders were late in their leadership careers, with 49% having five or more years of total leadership experience. However, as shown in Table 3, a majority (57%) had been leading at their current school for less than four years.

Table 3. School leader survey demographics: Years of leadership experience and years at current school

	N	≤ 1 year	2 to 3 Years	4 to 5 Years	5+ Years
Total Years of Leadership Experience	65	11%	28%	12%	49%
Years Leading at Current School	65	12%	45%	12%	31%

Student Survey

The student survey was developed by FullScale, with input from students and teachers at MBLC schools, as well as SBE staff. The survey was designed to measure students' experiences of CRS MBL practices at their school, as well as to measure some of the interim outcomes of interest, namely cognitive engagement, teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, and three habits of success adapted from the Washington Profile of a Graduate[7]: agentic thinking and goal pursuit,

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[7] https://sbe.wa.gov/our-work/graduation-requirements/profile-graduate

teamwork, and cultural openness and desire to learn. To build the survey, we adapted questions from well-established surveys and included ideas from past research with students. The final survey included 66 items measuring key concepts across instructional and relational domains aligned with the initiative's objectives:

- Mastery-Based Learning included items that addressed learning clear goals and competencies, getting meaningful feedback, having choices in how and when to learn, and receiving timely support.

- Culturally Responsive Education items focused on experiences that include diverse perspectives, treating students' backgrounds as strengths, and encouraging awareness of social issues.

- Student Engagement items addressed how connected students felt to their learning, their teachers, and their peers.

- Habits of Success measured skills like setting goals, working well with others, and being open to new ideas and cultures.

Each concept was measured using a small set of questions that reflected students' real-life classroom and school experiences. Some items were adapted for students in Big Picture Learning programs, where students are organized into advisories and learning takes place through personalized, real-world experiences rather than traditional classroom structures. The complete survey instrument can be found in the [MBLC Cohort 1 Year 4 Technical Report](#).

The survey was administered online via Qualtrics. It took approximately 15 minutes to complete and was designed to be age-appropriate and accessible for students in grades 6 through 12. The survey was developed in English and translated into Spanish; students could choose their preferred language using a dropdown menu in the corner of the screen. At the beginning of the survey, students were informed about the purpose of the data and given the option to either assent to participation or opt out. Students were also told that they could skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering; the survey was programmed to allow them to proceed without answering each item. In addition to students assenting to their participation, each school also notified parents/guardians about the upcoming survey and provided an opportunity for them to opt their children out of participating.

Unlike the teacher and school leader surveys, student surveys were not distributed via email. Instead, each school nominated a staff member to coordinate survey administration during the school day, using a district-specific link that students accessed through their learning management system (LMS) or school website. Each school organized a 25- to 30-minute window, typically during an advisory period, for students to sit down and take the survey. Teachers were provided with a facilitation script that explained how to access the link, outlined the purpose of the survey and its intended use, and informed students that participation was optional. At the end of each scheduled participation window, FullScale staff would check participation rates by grade level

and send an update to the school coordinator. If participation rates were low, the coordinator would be asked to organize makeups to ensure that all students had the opportunity to participate.

Responses were received from all 21 eligible[8] schools in Cohort 1. Response rates varied across schools, ranging from 14% to 100% of eligible students participating in the survey, with an average school response rate of 60% across the cohort. Response rates varied significantly by grade level, with lower grade levels having higher response rates than upper grade levels, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Student survey response rates by grade level

	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
Number of respondents	1,037	1,025	942	669	527	455	376
Percent of eligible respondents	64%	62%	53%	48%	44%	34%	28%

Student survey participants spanned a range of developmental stages, with the majority falling within the early and middle adolescence stages (Figure 8). Specifically, 57% of respondents were in early adolescence (ages 12–14), and 31% were in middle adolescence (ages 15–17). A smaller proportion of students were in pre-adolescence (ages 9–11), representing 8% of the sample, while 5% were in late adolescence (ages 18–21). This distribution aligns with the grade levels of participating schools. It also provides context for interpreting students' developmental readiness for agency, reflection, and academic self-regulation within culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning environments.

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[8] There is one elementary school in cohort 1 that was not eligible to participate in the student survey.

Figure 8. Student survey demographics: Ages and development stage
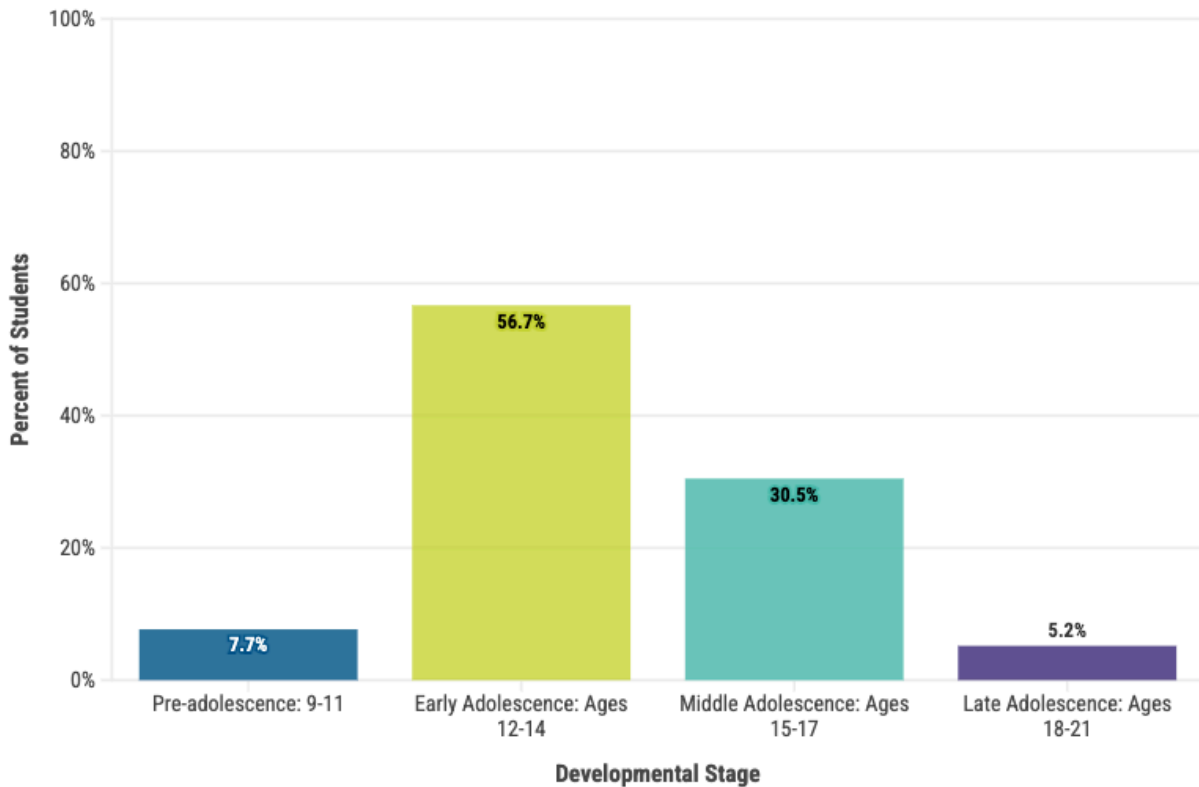
Source: National Academies of Science (2019).
Note: N = 4068, self-reported age in the student survey.

As shown in Figure 9, student survey participants represented a diverse range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Just over half (51%) identified as White, followed by 21% as Hispanic, ~10% as Native American, 8.98% as "Private" (declined to state), 7.60% as Asian, 6.90% as Other, 6% as Black or African American, ~5% as Multiracial, 1% as Middle Eastern or North African, and <1% as Pacific Islander. Participants could select more than one category, so percentages do not sum to 100.

Figure 9. Student survey demographics: Race and ethnicity
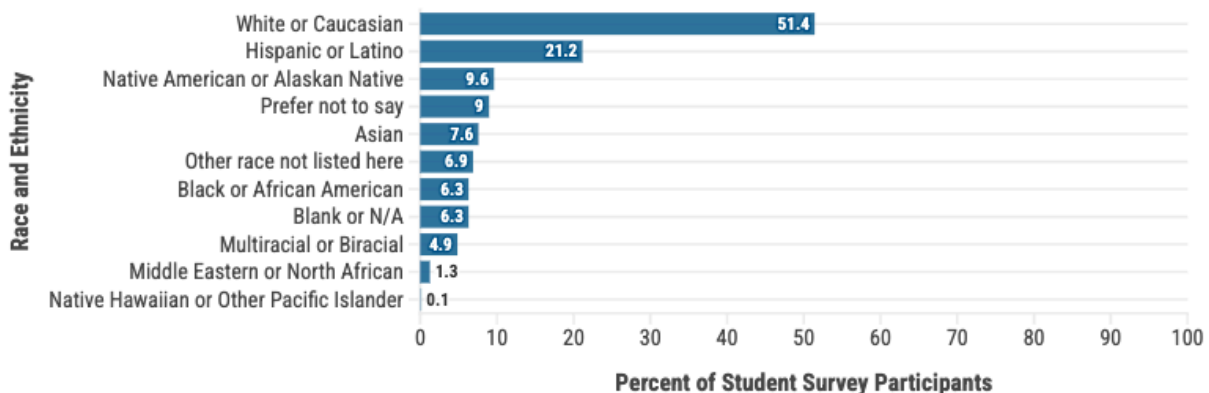
Source: MBLC Student Survey 2025

To ensure the survey accurately captured the distinct instructional and relational domains it was designed to measure, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). This statistical method allowed us to test whether student responses aligned with the theoretical structure of the survey, providing evidence that the subscales represent valid and reliable constructs. Establishing this structural validity was essential for our intended use of the subscales to examine how the depth of CRS MBL implementation is associated with student-reported experiences and outcomes. Reliability estimates were examined alongside model fit and factor loadings to inform potential item revision or construct refinement (Table 5). In short, the analysis confirmed that the survey results could be trusted to reflect how students experience key aspects of culturally responsive, mastery-based learning environments. All analyses were conducted using the R statistical software.

Table 5. Student survey confirmatory factor analysis results and subscale reliability

Instructional and Relational Domains	# Subscales	# Items	χ^2 (df)	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR	McDonald's ω (range)
Exposure to MBL Practices	4	20	678.499 (164)	0.935	0.925	0.05 [0.046, 0.054]	0.038	0.69 –.0.80
Exposure to CRSE Practices	4	13	312.680 (59)	0.967	0.956	0.059 [0.052, 0.065]	0.029	0.72 – 0.84
Student Engagement	3	11	279.160 (41)	0.956	0.941	0.068 [0.061, 0.076]	0.047	0.78 – 0.82
Habits of Success	3	10	148.313 (32)	0.979	0.971	0.054 [0.045, 0.063]	0.038	0.77 – 0.87

Source: MBLC Student Survey 2025

Note. CFA model fit was evaluated using multiple indices. Values ≥ .90 on the CFI and TLI indicate acceptable fit. Values ≤ .08 on the RMSEA and the SRMR indicate acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Student, Teacher, and School Leader Interviews and Focus Groups

In Year 4, FullScale staff visited six schools from Cohort 1 to conduct interviews and focus groups with teachers, school administrators, and students. Four of those six schools had participated in a virtual interview in Year 1, but had not yet been visited in person as part of the evaluation. One of the six schools had not been visited or interviewed in previous years. The sixth school had been visited in person as part of the Year 3 evaluation.

The group of selected schools was designed to represent a diversity of school experiences, including grade levels enrolled, geography, student demographics, and community socioeconomic status. We visited one rural school, one school in a small town, two suburban schools, and two urban schools. One of the schools visited was considered "medium-large" (200-400 students per grade), while the others were all "tiny" (20-50 students per grade). The percentage of English Learners at each school visited varied widely, ranging from 0% to 40%, and the percentage of students experiencing poverty also varied significantly, from 32% to 85%. The racial diversity of both students and staff also varied widely across the site visit schools.

At each school, we requested to interview at least two teachers, one administrator, and multiple students. Schools were asked to recruit participants for the interviews who represented diverse identities and perspectives. We interviewed 22 teachers, seven school leaders, and 36 students in grades 6 through 12. We collected demographic data from teachers and school leaders to understand how representative this group might be of the broader cohort. Overall, the sample we spoke to consisted of 48% males and 52% females. This is much more balanced than the overall composition of the teacher workforce in Washington or Cohort 1 schools, which is predominantly female. School leaders were intentional in selecting educators for interviews who reflected diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Asian, Pacific Islander, Black, White, and multiracial participants. The group also represented a broad range of teaching experience, from early-career educators to those with over 20 years in the profession.

The semi-structured interview protocols used during site visits were developed by FullScale and modified based on feedback from SBE staff, covering the same topics as the surveys. However, they provided an opportunity to gather deeper, qualitative data and more nuanced insights.

Professional Learning Provider and State Leader Interviews

FullScale conducted two one-hour interviews with SBE staff who lead and manage the MBLC, as well as one hour-long interview with the Professional Learning Partner leaders. The semi-structured interview protocols were drafted by FullScale and modified with input from SBE staff. Both interviews were conducted via Zoom in May 2025. The SBE staff interview was conducted with Seema Bahl, Associate Director of the Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative;

Alissa Muller, Director of Policy; Randy Spaulding, Executive Director; and Arielle Mathews, Policy and Program Manager. The Professional Learning Partner interview was conducted with Kate Gardoqui, Senior Associate, and Clyde Cole, Senior Associate. Qualitative analysis of all interviews focused on a set of themes drawn from the evaluation questions.

Observation of Professional Learning Activities

Throughout the year, FullScale's staff attended MBLC network professional learning, both in-person and virtually. This included a webinar, a meeting with the Impact Fellows, and an in-person fall gathering. Observations focused on the professional learning provided, attitudes and beliefs, and other factors that may influence changes in educator practices, school structures, and school culture.

Secondary Data Collection

We also collected secondary data about MBLC activities and schools throughout the year. This included the monthly activity tracker maintained by the PLP coaches, school applications, work plans, and other documents used by the PLP and SBE to manage initiative activities. We also collected school-level data from OSPI's Washington State Report Card to gain a better understanding of the demographic composition of the cohort compared to the rest of the state.

Level of Implementation Measure

In this evaluation, we use the term "level of implementation" to refer to the extent to which schools reported engaging in key practices. This term was chosen deliberately to reflect the self-reported nature of the data, which captures schools' assessments rather than external observations. As future evaluation efforts incorporate observational measures, we anticipate distinguishing these more rigorous indicators using terms such as "depth of implementation." This distinction preserves clarity between perceived implementation and demonstrated implementation.

Further, the implementation of culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based education looks different in various contexts. The goal of the MBLC was to support a wide variety of schools from across the state in transforming their learning conditions in line with MBL and CRSE principles, rather than producing schools that lack local distinctiveness. Therefore, any overall measure of implementation depth and quality needed to be sufficiently flexible to capture the wide range of possible directions that schools might have taken in this work. However, there are also known indicators and "look-fors" that help identify high-quality mastery-based learning and culturally responsive and sustaining education. Due to this complexity, we employed two approaches to measuring implementation quality and depth: an overall categorical measure and a series of descriptive measures.

Overall Measure of Level of Implementation

To measure the overall level of MBL CRSE implementation, we created a measure of each school's perceptions of implementation using three self-report indicators from teacher and school leader surveys given over the last three years. These items are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Level of implementation measure components

Survey	Timepoints	Question	Response Scale
Teacher	Year 3 Year 4	How regularly are you implementing culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning (CRS MBL) strategies in your classroom?	1. I am not yet implementing any CRS MBL strategies in my classroom. 2. I am just beginning to implement a few CRS MBL strategies in my classroom. 3. I am regularly implementing CRS MBL strategies in my classroom for a portion of the time. 4. I am consistently implementing CRS MBL strategies in my classroom most or all of the time.
School leader	Year 2 Year 3 Year 4	Our school is already implementing MBL deeply.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Somewhat disagree 3. Neither agree nor disagree 4. Somewhat agree 5. Strongly agree
School leader	Year 2 Year 3 Year 4	Our school is already implementing CRSE deeply.	1. Strongly disagree 2. Somewhat disagree 3. Neither agree nor disagree 4. Somewhat agree 5. Strongly agree

Altogether, this resulted in eight data points reflecting the perceived level of implementation over a three-year period. We calculated the population mean for each data point and a mean value for each school. Then, for each school, we created a single categorical variable based on the number of data points that were above the population mean. If a school had at least six data points above the population mean, it was considered to have a high perceived level of implementation. Schools with three to five data points above the population mean were deemed to have a moderate perceived level of implementation. In comparison, those with fewer than three data points with mean values above the population mean were characterized as having a low perceived level of implementation.

It is important to recognize that "level of implementation" is a subjective measure. It reflects how educators and leaders *view* their school's engagement in CRS MBL practices; therefore, it can be influenced by bias. To assess bias in this measure, we conducted a series of fidelity checks, including comparisons with qualitative data about the school obtained from SBE and the school's PLP coach. We found that in the majority of cases, the self-reported measure matched the qualitative external observations.

Data Analysis

This mixed-methods evaluation employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis to examine the Year 4 implementation of CRS MBL, as well as changes over time across implementation years.

Quantitative Approach

The survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize educator and student responses and explore patterns in the direction and magnitude of responses within Year 4. Where applicable, these results were compared to survey data from previous implementation years to assess changes over time.

Inferential analyses were conducted to evaluate the statistical significance of differences in average responses over time and to examine the associations between factors related to implementation and student outcomes. Specifically, ANOVA was used to test for mean differences across implementation years. Because this evaluation examined multiple domains of practice, a large number of ANOVAs were conducted to test for differences across years of implementation. While this approach allows us to identify potential areas of change, it also increases the likelihood of detecting statistically significant results by chance. To address this, we report effect sizes (f) alongside p-values to help gauge the practical significance of findings. Across most analyses, effect sizes were small, indicating that even when differences reached statistical significance, they typically reflected modest shifts rather than large changes. Therefore, results should be interpreted with caution and considered in conjunction with descriptive patterns and qualitative evidence, which provide additional context for understanding the direction and meaning of observed changes.

To explore the relationships between the level of implementation and student outcomes, we created composite scores for each instructional and relational outcome subscale by standardizing item responses (z-scores) and aggregating them within each construct. Standardization ensured that all items contributed equally to the composite, regardless of differences in scale or variability. We then employed hierarchical linear regression, which allowed us to control for key contextual variables (e.g., race and ethnicity, grade level) and account for the nested structure of the student outcomes data (i.e., students within schools). The analysis was based on a two-level hierarchical linear model with students at level 1 and schools at level 2 to account for the nesting of students within schools. We used intraclass correlation coefficients to evaluate the degree of consistency between outcome measures within schools because of nesting. The coefficients ranged from 0.04 to 0.16 (on a scale of 0 to 1.0, where 1.0 represents a high degree of consistency or overlap) and were statistically significant. The regression models were run separately for each outcome variable.

Student covariates in the main regression models included grade, gender, IEP status, and race, all with a category for 'not reported.' School covariates included the binary indicator of school size (<50 students per grade = 1; 0 otherwise), the percentage of students from low-income backgrounds, the percentage of students who identified as White, and the percentage of students with disabilities. The model compared outcomes across levels of implementation with low implementation as the reference category (see Cohort 1 Year 4 Technical Report for more details).

Three sensitivity analyses were performed to verify the associations in the main regression models. The first sensitivity analysis involved adding two variables that were suspected to be measured with error: economic advantage[9] and previous achievement. These variables could also represent important unobserved student characteristics. The second sensitivity analysis restricted the sample to only complete cases. The third sensitivity analysis involved replacing the perceived level of implementation categorical variable with a continuous variable on a scale of 0 to 8, corresponding to the total number of implementation measures that exceeded the mean. The latter was important because **the implementation levels were linked to school size, meaning that students in schools considered "high level of implementation" were usually in schools with 50 or fewer students per grade.** We will provide more details in the findings section once we finish outlining the MBLC inputs for context.

There are some important limitations to the level of implementation of quantitative and qualitative analyses. First, the relationships between the perceived level of implementation and the outcomes should be interpreted as correlational rather than causal. There may be unmeasured factors that are correlated with both the perceived level of implementation and the outcome variables. For instance, there may be ways in which schools with a high perceived level of implementation operate that distinguish them from schools with a low perceived level of implementation, ways that are not captured by the variables included in the model.

Second, the student outcomes were measured at a specific point in time, so it was not possible to determine whether the outcomes improved over time due to the school's participation in the MBLC or if students' outcomes were consistently higher for other reasons.

Third, the perceived level of implementation may be measured with error, given that the variable was constructed only from teachers and school leaders who completed the survey; these individuals may not have been the same over time. Level of implementation is also a subjective interpretation of the depth of CRS MBL practices in their schools and does not capture the degree to which schools participated in this initiative. Despite these limitations, the results provide valuable insights to inform future hypotheses and inform the development of improved data collection processes to support those analyses.

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[9] We used a combination of student Family Affluence Scale (Torsheim et al., 2016) and free- or reduced-priced lunch data to derive the economic advantage measure. It is a dichotomous variable that sorts students in two categories: economically advantaged (33.5%) and economically disadvantaged (49.5%). We had insufficient or missing data for about 17% of students in our study. The reader is referred to the Technical Report for more information.

All quantitative analyses were conducted using R or Stata, and statistical significance was interpreted at the p < .05 level unless otherwise noted.

Qualitative Approach

Open-ended responses from surveys and transcribed interviews, and focus group discussions were analyzed using qualitative methods to deepen our understanding of implementation experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits related to MBL and CRSE.

The qualitative analysis followed an open coding approach, guided by the evaluation's research questions and the seven elements of the CBE definition. We first conducted an initial round of inductive coding to identify salient patterns and emergent themes (e.g., benefits, challenges). These initial codes were then organized into a structured coding framework aligned with the mastery-based elements of the framework.

Data were coded using Dedoose, and coding notes were captured throughout the process to document and refine interpretations. The coding process emphasized both convergence and divergence across school leaders, teachers, and students, as well as implementation contexts (e.g., large schools, rural), allowing for a nuanced understanding of how CRS MBL practices are being experienced in schools. Findings from the qualitative analysis were used to contextualize and expand quantitative results, surface role-specific insights, and inform recommendations for policy, practice, and systems change.

Evaluator Positionality

There are two authors for the current evaluation report; they differ from the previous Cohort 1 reports. Neither author is from Washington State. Both have subject-matter expertise in student-centered learning and research in school-based education. One author is a Black woman with a doctorate; the other is a White woman with a master's degree. Both study authors contributed to interpreting findings and analyzing their importance for the MBLC work. It is likely that our positionality—our ethnoracial backgrounds, education, and prior experience, as well as our status as outsiders to the Washington context—influenced our interpretations of the data. To minimize bias, notes were taken on our own reactions to and interpretations of certain findings; however, we acknowledge that our own analytical lenses deeply inform this report. To help ensure that additional perspectives are also included, both authors have reviewed the report and consulted with other members of the FullScale team and SBE staff.

MBLC Inputs

To better understand the findings described in the subsequent section of this report, we describe the activities undertaken and support received by Cohort 1 in the 2024-2025 school year (Year 4 of their participation in the MBLC), which we will collectively refer to as "inputs" to align with the logic model previously shown in Figure 3. These inputs are arranged into five categories: state support, funding and grant allocations, professional learning, coaching support, and resources from the national ecosystem.

State Support

Schools in Cohort 1 continued to receive significant support from SBE throughout their fourth school year in the initiative. Most of the work supporting school-level planning and implementation of CRS MBL practices is conducted by the PLP. It will be described in the upcoming section of the report.

However, SBE maintained close communication with the coaches to stay aware of the schools' progress. Additionally, they maintained direct communication with the schools to monitor implementation successes and challenges, gauge community buy-in, and provide additional support as needed. The state's direct funding through SBE and OSPI (including ESSER funds) is set to conclude for Cohort 1 schools after FY25. However, the MBLC's infrastructure is designed for sustainability, providing opportunities for Cohort 1 schools to continue their engagement. Cohort 1 schools are encouraged to remain engaged in the MBLC through an alumni network and ongoing community gatherings, reinforcing the MBLC's commitment to long-term learning and collaboration.

Monitoring School Experience

In addition to the support described above, SBE staff visited MBLC schools regularly to observe the progress of the work and identify areas where they could provide additional clarity or support to school teams. In addition to independent visits, SBE staff accompanied PLP coaches on their fall and spring visits to Cohort 1 schools and also joined FullScale staff evaluators on Cohort 1 spring site visits. SBE staff also met biweekly with PLP coaches to receive updates on each school, stay informed about statewide patterns and progress, and gather feedback from schools to identify potential changes to the MBLC that would be beneficial in the future.

Sustaining Positive Outlooks

This year, the SBE team increasingly supported schools in navigating the impact of Washington State's ongoing budget crisis on their CRS MBL efforts (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2025). Many districts faced local budget cuts, resulting in staffing shortages and spending restrictions that directly impacted implementation. The gubernatorial transition in

January 2025 added further uncertainty around continued state support for the MBLC. Although the new administration ultimately approved a budget that included funding for MBLC, the allocation was reduced significantly, from $5 million annually to $1 million per year for FY2026 and FY2027. The delayed approval of even this reduced funding created prolonged uncertainty throughout the 2024–25 school year, disrupting planning and momentum for participating schools.

Beyond the funding environment, the political landscape at both the national and state levels had also undergone significant changes over the school year. Changes in the federal government resulted in tension and uncertainty not only around federal funding for education in Washington state, but also for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives more broadly, including culturally responsive and sustaining education, and educational equity work – key pillars of the MBLC. As one SBE staff member wondered aloud,

"How do we sustain our commitment to the CRSE work in this politically challenging environment, and really try to be responsive to the schools, but also really center the students and equity?"

These challenges contributed to a climate in which asking schools to plan for, invest in, and implement transformative change was an even more uphill climb than it might otherwise have been. One SBE staff member described it as "collective weight added to the system… that makes it difficult for them to think creatively and positively towards the kinds of change that we want to see." As another SBE team member explained,

> **The State Board saw its role in Year 4 as helping to maintain schools' confidence in the state's commitment to and support of the MBLC work amid a major shift in national DEI policies.**

"Schools are getting really squeezed… so how do they commit their time, energy, and staff morale as they're doing this very difficult, transformative work, right? The easy thing is to say, 'Okay, well, let's just go back to what we've been doing and, you know, save ourselves because of all the challenges,' versus 'No, let's be brave.' And I have seen bravery [in] the schools. They really believe in the work. They know it's the right work."

- SBE Staff Member

State-Level Policy Shifts

In the 2024-2025 school year, SBE staff dedicated significant time and effort to building a strong base of legislative support for culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning. This included educating the legislature and advocating for the continuation of funding in the state budgetary process, as well as efforts to pass Senate Bill 5189 (Washington State Legislature, 2025), which implements several recommendations from previous MBLC evaluation reports. The passage

of this bill marks a significant step forward in removing barriers to implementing CRS MBL in Washington schools.

Student Advisory

This year, for the first time, SBE led the MBLC student advisory work across the state. In previous years, this was led by one of the professional learning providers, but with their departure from the project this year, SBE brought that work in-house. The goal is that this work informs the MBLC work directly and helps "build the muscle" of creating space for meaningful youth voice among participating schools. As one SBE staff member explained,

"I think [youth voice] is an important aspect of this as we think about how this can sustain itself. You know, after funding is gone, how do we make sure students are talking about this? How do we make sure that the adults in the building are involving students in decisions? ... Something that I think really came from the [youth advisory] work was not only equipping this group of students with a better understanding of what mastery-based learning is and what culturally responsive and sustaining education is, but to really have them think deeply about how that was functioning in their own buildings, to hear about how it was functioning at other buildings, and give students an idea of what it could be, so that they could advocate for that and participate in a different way with adults than how they typically might get to."

- SBE Staff Member

The youth advisory work has taken the form of an advisory board comprising 26 students from both cohorts, who gather every other month to discuss concepts related to MBL and CRSE and share their experiences at their respective schools. Student advisors also attended the spring in-person gathering alongside adult members of their schools' MBLC teams. By connecting students across the state, SBE aims to expose them to various implementation practices and continue to foster the networked peer learning that is central to the MBLC model.

Project and Network Management

As in previous years, SBE also provided logistical and project management support to keep the MBLC initiative running, including coordinating with coaches, responding to new needs that arose, collecting feedback to make adjustments for future years, and helping to gather lessons learned and connect schools for peer learning across the state. These behind-the-scenes efforts laid the foundation for Cohort 1's deep professional learning and paved the way for a smooth transition to sustainable implementation.

Implementation Grants

Once selected, each grantee received funding and support from SBE, as well as professional learning opportunities and coaching support. In the first year, which was focused on goal-setting and planning, grantees received $40,000 in funding. To remain in the initiative and continue

receiving support in subsequent years, participating schools were required to submit annual continuation documents that demonstrated reflection, progress, and alignment with the initiative's goals. During these subsequent years, each grantee was eligible to receive $125,000 in Year 2, $110,000 in Year 3, and up to $80,000 in Year 4.

The continuation documents, alongside detailed work plans, served both as accountability tools and as sources of formative feedback. Each year, school leaders were expected to articulate how they were implementing culturally responsive, mastery-based learning in their specific contexts. In response, SBE and PLP coaches provided individualized feedback, offering both constructive guidance and affirming recognition of schools' progress. These iterative reports helped schools clarify their direction, sustain momentum, and connect their local practices to broader goals of equity and personalized learning.

Grantees also included detailed budgets with continuation documents. These budgets demonstrated how districts and schools allocated these funds, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to advance their implementation. Grantees consistently allocated the highest percentage of their grants to instruction and curriculum and professional learning. Like in previous years, the most significant investment in Year 4 was in teacher capacity-building. Grantees allocated their MBLC grants to largely support activities such as:

- Staff collaboration

- Model and peer school visits

- Release time for developing discipline-specific assessment tools and refining project-based learning practices

- Conference participation

- Transportation to field experiences

- Digital portfolio tools (e.g., UnRuler)

- Supplemental curriculum materials

Although not at the level of instruction, curriculum, and professional learning investment, **grantees used MBLC funds to support positions such as part-time CRSE deans, MBL instructional coaches, and mastery-based learning coordinators, who led professional development and collaboration.** These choices provide a strong signal for CRSE and MBL capacity-building and potential sustainability. For example,

- One school hired an in-building coach to support teachers with project design and refinement, provide guidance on rubric development, and serve as an equity coach.

- One district allocated approximately $10,000 of grant funding to its two participating schools to partially fund the salary of a Director of Teaching and Learning—a role that was previously unfunded. This allocation was specifically made to help build capacity for sustained MBL implementation by supporting team facilitation, staff professional learning, and shared instructional leadership in partnership with the secondary principal, who served as the district athletic director and sole administrator for grades 6 through 12.

- Another school designated its supervision funds for sustainability planning, signaling a proactive focus on ensuring the long-term viability of its MBL structures and practices.

While these positions and initiatives may not be permanently funded beyond the life of the grant, they nonetheless serve as transitional investments that strengthen educator expertise, distribute leadership, and create collaborative structures that are more likely to endure. In this way, the grant-supported roles contribute to sustainability not by guaranteeing ongoing funding, but by embedding practices and building capacity that can persist within existing systems.

Professional Learning

MBLC professional learning was streamlined and made more focused in response to participant feedback.

"We got a little overwhelmed by PD meetings, so we finally ended up with a system where we were like, Okay, we made a schedule of all those meetings and then had people sign up for those. But it took us a while to get to that point. Sometimes I heard people just say it was a little too much, especially like the first year or two, it just felt like it was like, Oh, it's another one."

- High School Teacher, Alternative School

Instead of multiple virtual sessions per month, MBLC teams were asked to attend one network-wide meeting per month throughout the school year (except for December and April). Most of those meetings happened online, but two were held in person. The monthly online meetings lasted approximately two hours and included a 30- to 45-minute webinar segment, followed by a 1-hour breakout room discussion with educators from other schools. Each monthly meeting had a topical theme and was designed to include content that would be useful to schools, regardless of their stage in the implementation journey. In response to feedback from previous years, participants could now choose which breakout room discussion they attended, thereby allowing them to personalize their learning experience.

In addition to the monthly full-cohort events, the PLP also organized two optional monthly gatherings for particular groups of educators. The first was a BIPOC affinity group, designed for all BIPOC staff members at MBLC schools who wished to attend. The goal of this group was to provide support for BIPOC educators working in MBLC schools, both to address specific challenges they might face in CRS MBL implementation and to support their retention and involvement in the MBLC

work at their schools. The second monthly gathering was the Impact Fellows. This group was designed to help educators who were taking on additional MBLC projects in their schools, with the hope of also preparing them to serve as coaches and consultants to other MBLC schools in the future.

Lastly, the PLP organized various events to support peer learning. In addition to the two in-person gatherings each year, which facilitate connections and visits between different MBLC schools across the state, the PLP maintained a regular cadence of blog posts[10] on the MBLC community site, sharing stories of innovations happening at MBLC schools. The PLP also organized a visit in March 2025 for educator teams to visit the NYC Competency Collaborative Schools in New York. PLP coaches also frequently share resources from organizations around the country to respond to schools' questions and interests.

Interviews suggested that some teachers implementing CRS MBL were either unaware of MBLC professional learning opportunities or did not receive sufficient follow-up support to integrate what they learned into their practice. One educator described a familiar pattern in which teachers attend promising professional learning, feel energized in the moment, but see little sustained follow-through once they return to their schools. This lack of ongoing coaching or structured opportunities to apply new strategies can limit the lasting impact of professional learning.

Coaching Support

Effective professional development goes beyond exposing teachers to new content. It supports them in applying that content within their own classroom contexts. The PLP dedicated five coaches to support Year 4 implementation. SBE expected schools to receive at least 1.5 hours of PLP coaching per month, or about 18 hours total. Between August 2024 and June 2025, MBLC Cohort 1 schools' average monthly coaching hours ranged from 1.5 to 4.4 PLP coaching hours per month[11]. This amount may also include additional coaching schools paid for through their MBLC grant.. Overall, the cohort exceeded the total amount of coaching (Median = 22.3 total hours). When disaggregated by level of implementation, the group of schools with a high level of implementation was slightly below the cohort median of 8.8 total hours per month, while the group of schools with a low level of implementation received substantially more coaching support (Median = 11.3 total hours per month). The group of schools with a moderate implementation level received less coaching overall (Median = 7.5 total hours per month). However, as shown in the box plot below (Figure 10), the distributions across groups overlap considerably, and these differences do not appear to be statistically significant. This suggests schools received the amount of coaching that aligned with their needs and capacity.

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[10] https://sites.google.com/greatschoolspartnership.org/mblc-community/blog/all-posts
[11] An estimate of cumulative coaching dosage across the four years is unavailable, as documentation practices varied over time

Figure 10. Amount of Year 4 coaching support (in hours) per month, by level of implementation
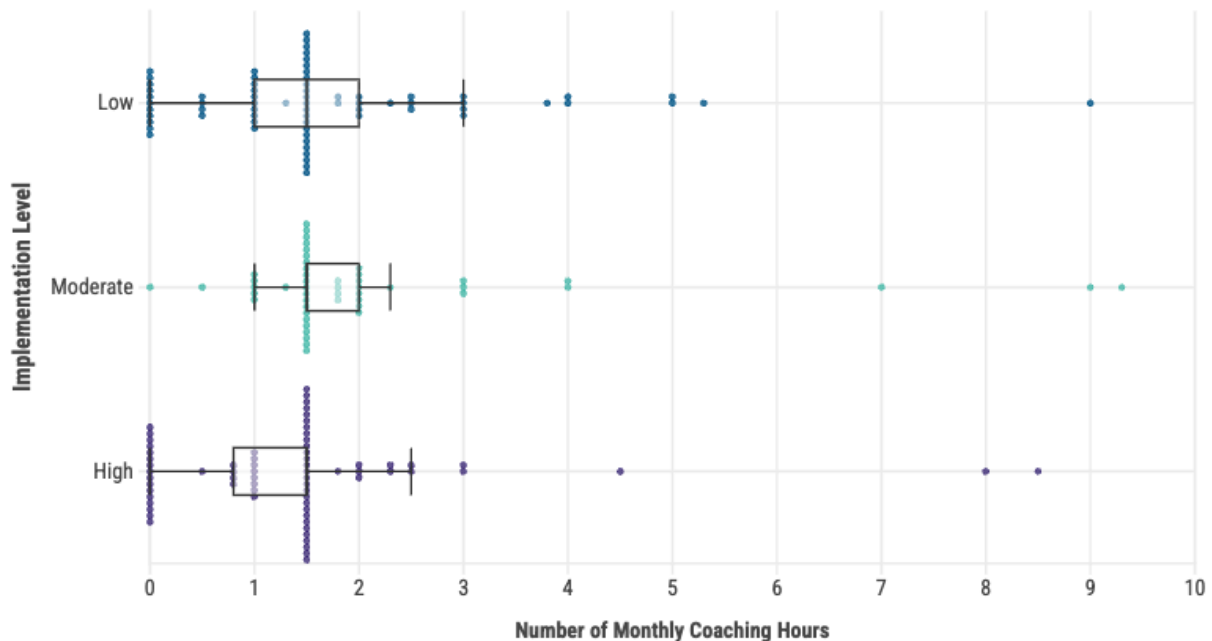
Source: 24-25 WA MBLC CRS Monthly Activity Tracker developed and maintained by the PLP.
Note. In this graphic, each dot represents the hours of coaching for a given month for a given school, by implementation level. The box represents the interquartile range (25th to 75th percentile), and the vertical line within the box represents the median.

PLP coaching followed the overarching guidance provided by the *Stages of CRS MBL Implementation* (see Figure 11 below). However, due to the hyper-local nature of implementation, coaches also customized their strategies to address the specific needs of each school. Coaching became more strategic and aligned. In earlier phases, schools interpreted CRS MBL differently, which led to inconsistent coaching and planning. With the introduction of a shared self-assessment aligned with project-wide CRS MBL indicators, coaches and teams worked from more transparent definitions of what CRS MBL looks like in practice, using school-generated data to guide their planning. The shift enabled more targeted and responsive coaching, allowing schools to develop work plans based on their identified areas for growth.

Figure 11. Stages of CRS MBL implementation
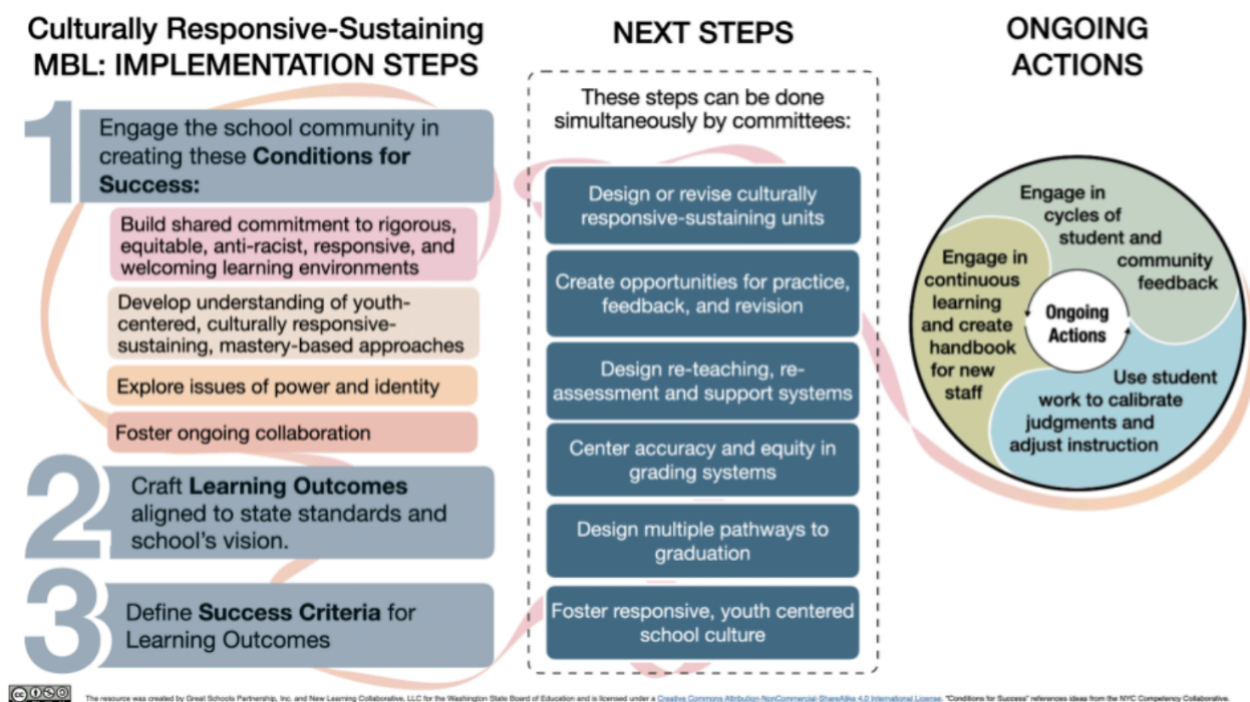
We also analyzed coaching notes from the MBLC initiative. While we acknowledge that the level of detail varied across coaches' entries, limiting our ability to assess the coaching strategies employed at each school, the data still offers valuable insights into the focus areas of coaching support. We categorized coaching activities into 16 distinct focus areas for implementation.

Table 7 provides examples of the most common elements of Year 4 coaching in these implementation focus areas. Schools across the implementation continuum received coaching that focused on instructional practice and pedagogy, as well as organizational development and planning.

Table 7. Most common Year 4 coaching focus areas by level of implementation

Coaching Area	Elements	Example
Instructional Practice	Support focused on specific strategies or classroom practices (e.g., circles, rubrics, social contracts); instructional rounds/classroom observations; Math PLC support; help with rubrics, prioritizing standards, use of AI	"MBLC team prioritizes greeting students, circles, social contracts" *Associated with high, moderate, and low implementers*
Organizational Development and Planning	MBLC team organization, priority-setting, and sustainability planning (school or district level); development of playbooks; feedback activity for staff; scaling work across teachers; PD planning	"Worked with team member to take next steps toward a sustainability plan" *Associated with high, moderate, and low implementers*
Professional Learning	Just-in-time MBL, CRS primers provided to staff, competencies; PD around assessment, PBL, and rubrics, and formative assessment	"They have a lot of new staff and CTE teachers who do not have an education background, they would benefit from a PD on MBL 101" *Associated with high and moderate implementers*
Resource Sharing	Sharing tools, articles, or documents (e.g., handbooks, slide decks, external consultants); examples of course competencies; sharing resources around embedding CTE standards into rubrics; samples of retake policies from a variety of schools	"Sent handbook examples to help design school's handbook" *Associated with high, moderate and low implementers*
Structural Systems Change	Schedule changes, course design, or integration into PD calendars or district-wide systems, technology	"Support structural changes to bell schedule to align with advisory vision" *Associated with high, moderate and low implementers*

Note. Authors' analysis of qualitative data in the Great Schools Partnership coaching data tracker

Across the full set of coaching data, interesting patterns emerged. Schools with a high level of implementation appeared to use coaching to develop internal systems and enhance staff capacity for sustained, equitable practice. Their needs focused less on foundational understanding, though coaching did not exclude this support, and more on aligning vision, tools, and strategies across the school, particularly in instruction, planning, and sustainability.

Schools with a moderate level of implementation used coaching to help translate priorities into coordinated plans and build coherence across teams. While not yet at the level of structural

alignment seen in high implementers, these schools were actively pursuing capacity-building, professional learning, additional coaching, and clearer instructional alignment, signs of movement toward deeper implementation.

Schools with a low level of implementation obtained coaching support that often focused on foundational learning design, awareness-building, and individual practice refinement. The coaching data suggests these schools were working to build coherence and clarity around CRS MBL, with many activities still grounded in planning or early experimentation rather than systemic integration.

Resources from the National Ecosystem

There are many states, schools, and organizations nationwide that are also working to advance culturally responsive and sustaining education, as well as mastery-based learning. In an effort to connect MBLC schools to helpful resources and events that support their professional learning, as well as share important updates specific to Washington state, the SBE sends out an email newsletter every other month, which is also posted on the MBLC website[12]. Additionally, schools used a portion of their grant funding to engage in supplemental professional learning opportunities, including partnerships with organizations such as Marzano Resources and Transcend.

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[12] https://sbe.wa.gov/our-work/mastery-based-learning/mastery-based-learning-collaborative

Key Findings

To aid our understanding of how Cohort 1 schools implemented CRS MBL and the intended outcomes, we have organized the evaluation findings according to the theory of action. In light of the inputs and outputs reviewed earlier, we start by examining leaders' and teachers' perceptions of readiness as key implementation quality indicators. We then explore their self-reported levels of implementation ("deepening CRS MBL implementation") and practice shifts, perceived core benefits, the relationship between implementation level and student outcomes, enabling conditions, and barriers.

Baseline School Self-Assessment: Early-Stage Implementation

Before we turn our attention to schools' progress toward the quality of CRS MBL implementation, it is worth considering where they began. Looking retrospectively at their starting points helps us better understand the level of Year 4 implementation in context. Of course, many other conditions contribute to an initiative's success. Later in the report, we will explore several of these as part of our effort to explain shifts in practice over time.

While completing their work plans in Year 1 (2021-2022), Cohort 1 schools were asked to self-assess their current state of CRSE and MBL implementation along three dimensions:

1. Equity stance: *Where is your school currently on a path to a schoolwide equity stance that actively exhibits a shared understanding of, value in, and commitment to educational equity as a basis for decision-making and practice?*

2. Schoolwide MBL implementation: *Where is your school currently on the path to school-wide, high-quality implementation of MBL principles and practices?*

3. Schoolwide CRSE implementation: *Where is your school currently on a path to school-wide, high-quality implementation of culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE) principles and practices?*

As shown in Figure 12, schools began creating more equitable systems and structures at varying starting points. Their self-assessments on each dimension spanned the continuum from early learning (on the left side of each graph) to deepening a school-wide equity stance (on the right side of each graph). However, many Cohort 1 schools had not yet established a shared vision for equity across the school community. **The majority of these schools clustered at the "early in acting on our shared commitment to equity" stage**.

Most schools tended to place themselves in the early stages of CRSE implementation (left side of the graph). They tended to report they were approaching, at, or just beyond piloting or building capacity for CRSE. Conversely, where schools placed themselves on the MBL implementation

continuum in Year 1, the distribution was more widely distributed. Again, very few started their MBLC work already having existing schoolwide systems for MBL. **Most were in the range of "piloting or building capacity" for MBL to "building schoolwide MBL systems"** (middle of the graph).

Figure 12. School Year 1 Self-assessment along Equity Stance, CRSE, and MBL
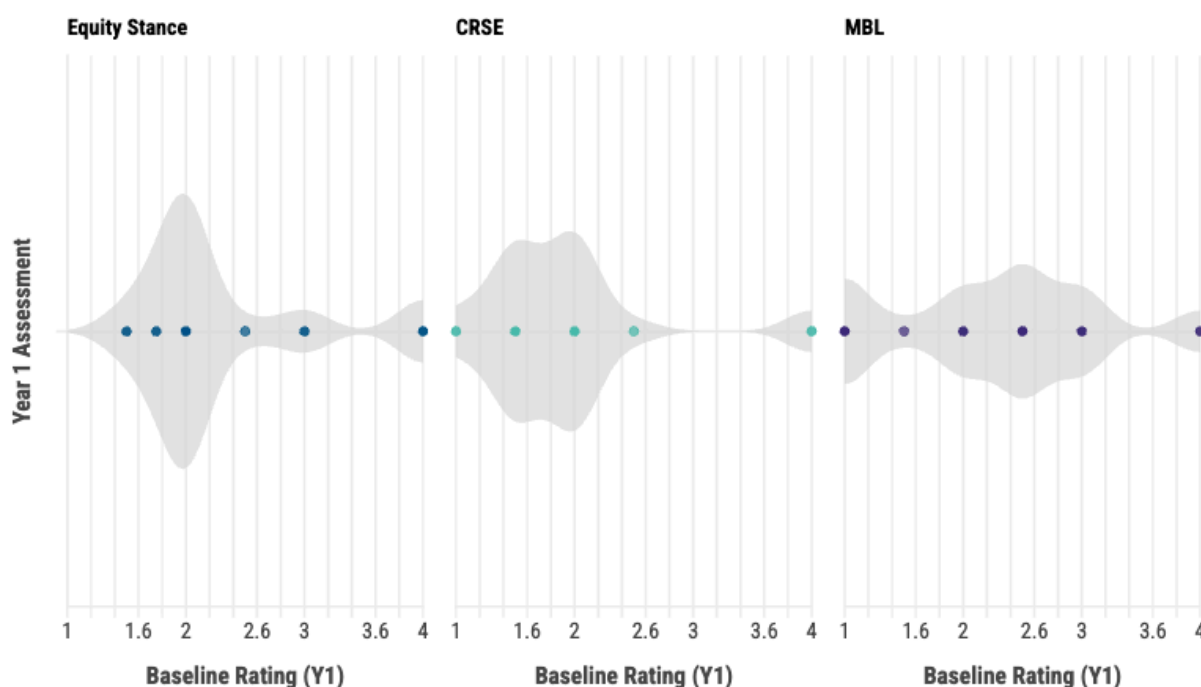
Note. Equity Stance scale: 1-New Learning for Us, 2-Early in Acting on Our Shared Commitment to Equity, 3-Building a Schoolwide Equity Stance, 4-Deepening Our Schoolwide Equity Stance; CRSE and MBL scales: 1-New Learning for Us, 2-Piloting/Building Capacity, 3-Building Schoolwide Systems, 4-Improving Existing Schoolwide Systems

Commitment and Readiness: Growing

A core MBLC goal is to meet schools where they are, support effective planning and implementation, and build school leaders' and teachers' capacity to sustain CRS MBL long term. As mentioned, SBE provided a regular schedule of professional learning, coaching, cross-school networking, and visits, with funding available at each district's or school's discretion for a period of four years to support capacity building. Many schools used their MBLC grant for resources such as book studies, staff training, additional full-time staff, and coaching to advance their individual CRSE and MBL goals. Given this level of investment, we expected participating schools to increasingly see themselves as committed and ready to implement CRS MBL.

Teacher Commitment to CRSE and MBL Implementation

We asked teachers to report their level of support for their school's plan to implement MBL and CRSE at increasingly deeper levels over the coming years. As shown in Figure 13, teachers' support for their school's plan to implement CRSE and MBL remained relatively stable over time. Nearly 75% of those surveyed stated they *"strongly agree"* or *"agree"* with their school's plan for CRSE and MBL.

Figure 13. Teachers' Support of the School's Intention to Implement MBL and CRSE
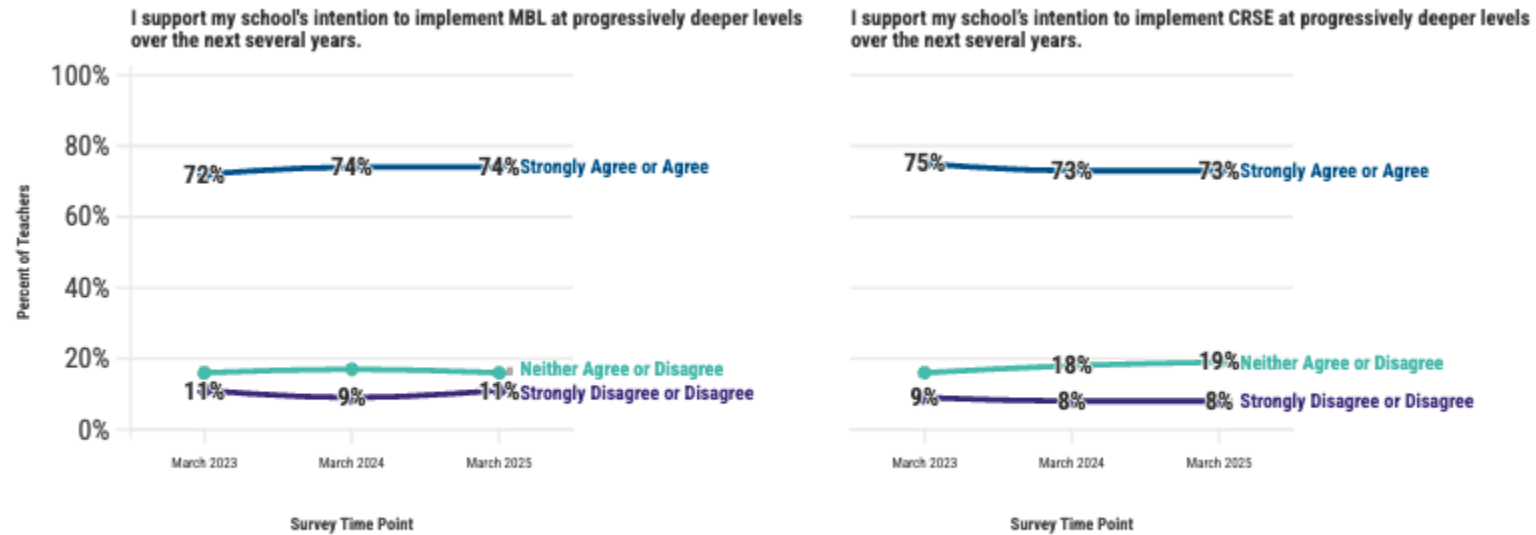
Source: MBLC Teacher Cohort 1 Survey – 2023, 2024, and 2025
Note: MBL Support: March 2023 N = 417, March 2024 N = 492; March 2025 N = 308; CRSE Support: March 2023 N = 421, March 2024 N = 490, March 2025 N = 302

Teacher Preparedness to Implement CRSE and MBL

Among all in-school factors influencing student success, teachers have the largest measurable effect (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014). Consequently, teacher preparedness to implement an innovation serves as a critical indicator of implementation quality (Mayo & Bradley, 2023). So, while Year 4 marked the end of Cohort 1's grant participation, we continued to ask about teachers' perceived readiness to implement MBL and CRSE.

Beyond initial capacity, readiness reflects changes in teachers' confidence to meet the demands of CRS MBL, their evolving professional learning needs, and the contextual conditions that shape sustained practice. More specifically, changes in staffing, leadership, and policy, and availability of professional learning and resources can influence whether educators feel prepared, even after several years of participation. For context, though most educators (79%) reported having five or more years of teaching experience, only 55% had been at their current school for five or more years. Nearly half of school leaders were relatively new leaders in their current school (57% had been in their positions for three years or less).

These patterns are particularly relevant given the reversal observed in Year 4, when fewer teachers reported feeling prepared to implement CRSE than MBL. **In Year 4, 77% of teachers reported feeling very or moderately prepared to implement MBL**, and 68% reported the same for CRSE. Notably, the gap between MBL and CRSE

> **Educators' average readiness to implement culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE) rose from "a little prepared" in Year 2 to nearly "moderately prepared" in Year 3, but then stalled, remaining only at the "moderately prepared" level in Year 4.**

preparedness widened in the final grant year. In Years 2 and 3, more teachers felt prepared to implement CRSE than MBL, by about five percentage points each year. In Year 4, that reversed. A smaller percentage of educators reported feeling ready to implement CRSE than MBL, by about nine percentage points.

This shift may reflect the increased complexity of embedding CRSE practices in instructional systems, the additional demands of equity-centered work amid shifting sociopolitical headwinds, and the reality that deeper CRSE integration often requires sustained structural and cultural change beyond individual instructional adjustments.

Figure 14. Teacher Preparedness to Implement MBL and CRSE
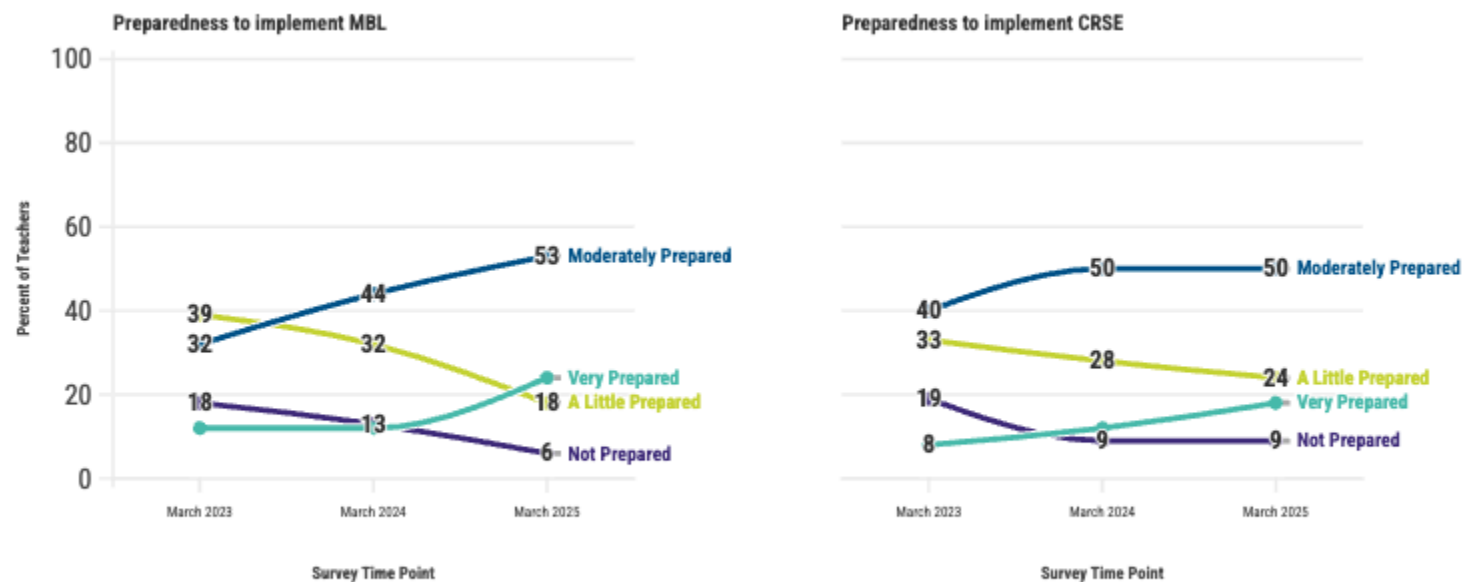
Source: MBLC Teacher Cohort 1 Survey – 2023, 2024, and 2025
Note: MBL Preparedness: March 2023 N = 417, March 2024 N = 492; March 2025 N = 308; CRSE Preparedness: March 2023 N = 421; March 2024 N = 490; March 2025 N = 302

To further explore changes in readiness to implement MBL and CRSE over time, we conducted a one-way ANOVA comparing Year 2, Year 3, and Year 4. Results indicated a statistically significant difference in readiness to implement MBL [$F_{(2, df)}$ = 39.35, $p < .001$] and CRSE [$F_{(2, df)}$ = 23.32, $p < .001$]. There was a notable increase in readiness to implement MBL over time, with the most significant shift happening between Year 3 and Year 4 (Appendix A, Table A1).

Preparedness to implement CRSE increased significantly from Year 2 to Year 3 (Appendix A, Table A2). However, the difference between Year 3 and Year 4 was not statistically significant. Broader sociopolitical dynamics related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism efforts, along with radical shifts in federal immigration policies and enforcement, may have had a chilling effect on the pace of CRSE implementation, influencing how confident some educators may have felt about engaging in this work.

Teachers' qualitative perspectives highlight these dynamics. One high school teacher pointed to deep-seated local inequities, noting that "students who aren't from the 'it' families are disregarded… I don't see MBL or CRSE fixing these issues. These issues run deep." Another cited community resistance, explaining that "a lot of people in our community do not believe in this as part of education." A school leader made a direct connection to national politics, recalling that when the new federal administration took office, "there was a lot of fear around immigration and deportation," which made it essential to have "the right people… willing to engage with that responsibly." Another educator described staff mindset barriers: "Some of our staff are waiting for Washington to lose its federal funding…the [federal] administration is determined to end CRSE and DEI practices."

Research has shown that collaborative, job-embedded professional development can build teacher efficacy and confidence, leading to schoolwide improvement (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). So, while the average perceived preparedness for CRSE implementation plateaued between Years 3 and 4, teachers' access to professional learning opportunities in both MBL and CRSE continued to grow. For MBL, the percentage of teachers who reported receiving four or more learning opportunities rose steadily from 41% in 2023 to 50% in 2024, then significantly to 59% in 2025 (Figure 15). At the same time, the proportion of teachers reporting no access to MBL-focused learning declined from 20% in 2023 to 10% in 2025, indicating an increase in access to professional support in this area. For CRSE, progress was more gradual (Figure 16). The percentage of educators receiving four or more CRSE-related professional learning sessions rose from 37% in 2023 to 43% in 2025, while those reporting no access decreased from 20% to 14% over the same period.

Figure 15. Frequency of Teacher Access to Professional Learning on Mastery-Based Learning Practices, by Year
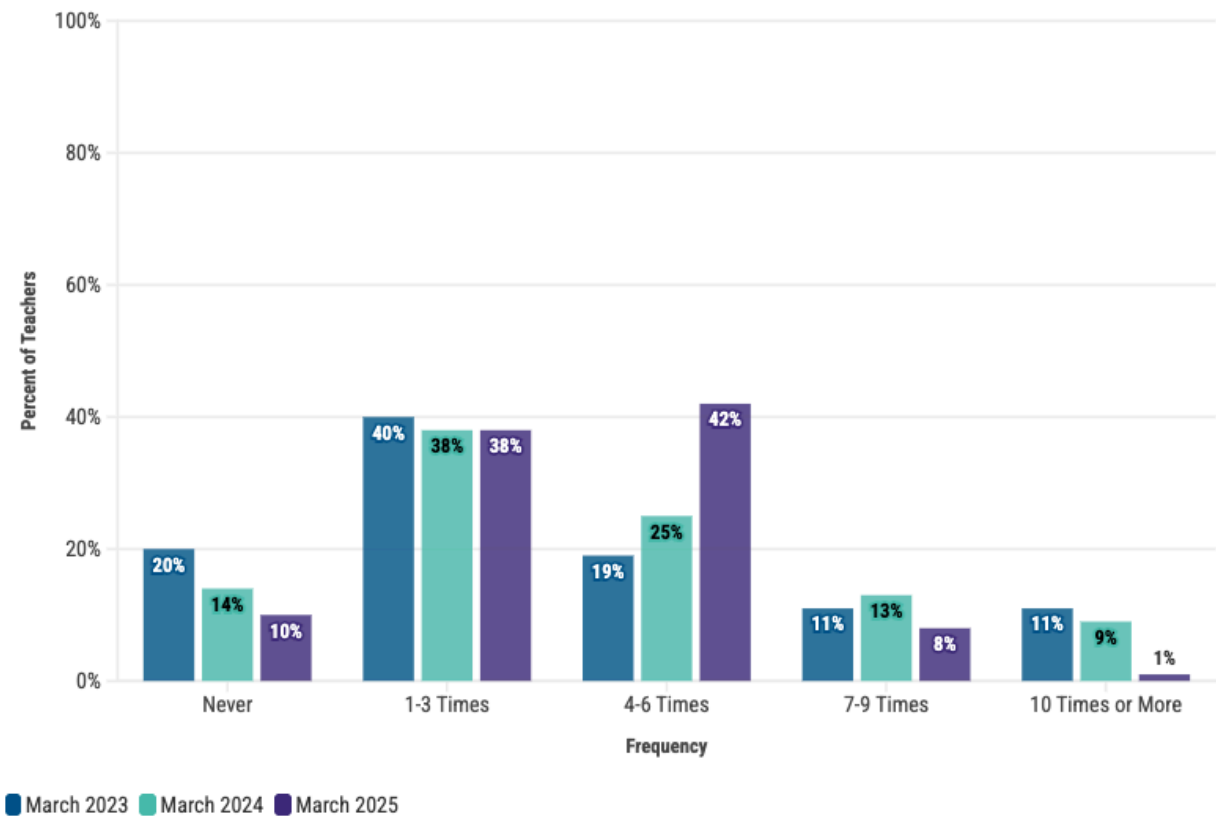
Source: MBLC Teacher Cohort 1 Survey 2024-2025

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Figure 16. Frequency of Teacher Access to Professional Learning on Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education Practices, by Year
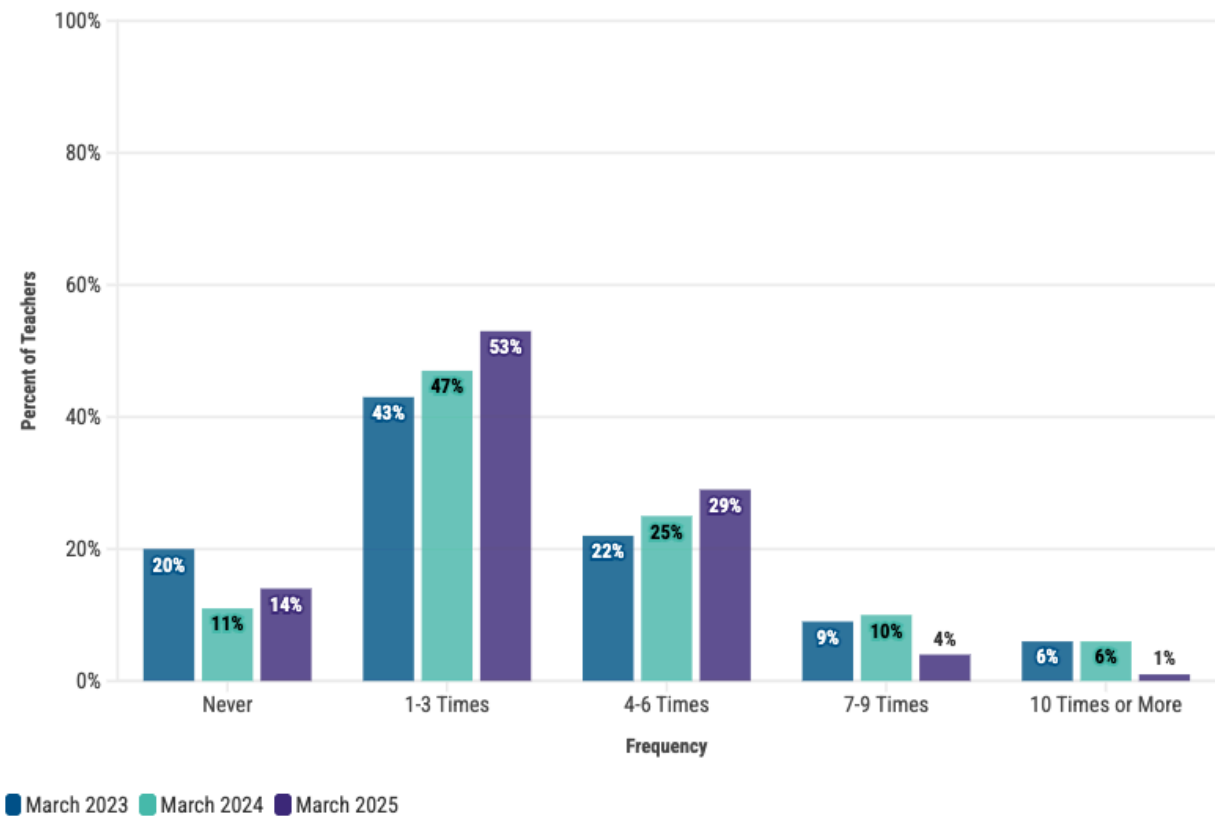
Source: MBLC Teacher Cohort 1 Survey 2024-2025

These findings suggest steady growth in access to professional learning opportunities that were aligned with both pillars of CRS MBL. Educators generally found the CRSE professional learning offered through the MBLC to be valuable, with several sharing positive feedback. As one school leader noted, *"I have really appreciated the collaboration and learning in the MBLC cohort, for my own learning, it has been powerful to identify models of CRSE and feedback."* Another reported, *"The CRSE curriculum and pedagogical strategies offered throughout our engagement in the MBLC has enriched our approach to engaging our students with the material."*

However, some educators expressed concerns about the quality, depth, or practicality of CRSE–related professional learning. Feedback included calls for more concrete resources, such as *"Provide the curriculum if you want us to teach a class at multiple levels and then train us on how to use an MBL CRSE curriculum during paid training,"* and requests for greater contextualization: *"We need a broader view and more videos to show how this has helped in schools. I am lost on the bigger picture."* Others urged a stronger focus on CRSE within PD: *"Our school should have more conversations about CRSE... We focus so much on MBL in our PDs and need to focus more on CRSE,"* and *"We need additional PD on culturally responsive teaching."*

These reflections **highlight the need for professional learning that is grounded in a clear vision for school improvement and student success, supported by readily available resources, and structured to alleviate teacher burden**, allowing educators to focus on applying and adapting strategies within a collaborative learning community.

Together, these findings reinforce the significance of sustained, well-designed job-embedded professional development in deepening CRSE understanding and practice across MBLC schools. While increased exposure to professional learning may not have immediately translated into increased confidence in CRSE implementation, or perhaps the effects were dampened by other factors, such as the depth and relevance of professional learning, the majority of schools and educators continued to invest in capacity-building efforts that could support longer-term growth.

School Leader Preparedness

Strong instructional and transformational leadership fosters teacher engagement and commitment, enhances school culture, and ultimately supports better student outcomes (Orphanos & Orr, 2014). Based on this evidence, we asked school leaders to tell us how prepared they were to lead their schools' implementation of MBL and CRSE. Figure 17 shows the cohort's responses over time. In Year 4, a higher percentage of school leaders felt very prepared or somewhat prepared to lead their schools' implementation of MBL (83%) and CRSE (70%), compared to Years 2 and 3. During Years 2 and 3, school leaders' sense of preparedness to lead was fairly similar for both MBL and CRSE; however, in Year 4, a gap appeared. School leaders felt more prepared to lead MBL implementation than they had in previous years with CRSE.

> In Year 4, a higher percentage of school leaders felt very prepared or somewhat prepared to lead their schools' implementation of MBL (83%) and CRSE (70%), compared to previous years.

Figure 17. School Leader Preparedness to Lead MBL and CRSE Implementation
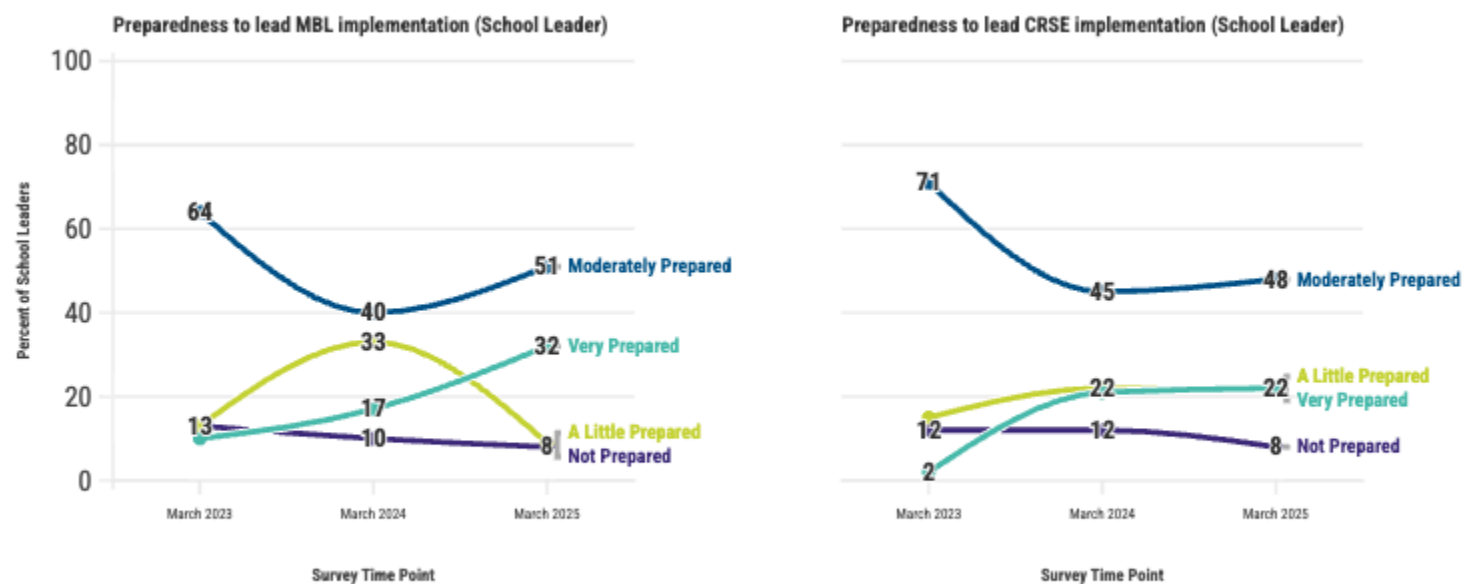
Source: MBLC Administrator/School Leader Cohort 1 Survey – 2023, 2024, and 2025
Note: MBL Preparedness: March 2023 N = 39, March 2024 N = 58; March 2025 N = 65; CRSE Preparedness: March 2023 N = 41; March 2024 N = 58; March 2025 N = 64

Taken together, the findings in this section and the previous one regarding grant allocations and coaching focus begin to paint a more complete picture of how schools are building the foundational conditions for high-quality implementation, including improvements in perceived preparedness among teachers and school leaders. The upward trend in teachers' and leaders' preparedness, particularly in MBL implementation, could reflect a combination of factors:

- the cumulative effect of sustained implementation support, particularly professional learning and coaching,
- differences in individual and school-level prior experience with MBL and CRSE,
- variation in who completed the teacher survey each year, and
- increasing alignment between teacher mindset, school leader vision, and school structures and resources.

One teacher described how alignment and support have transformed their confidence and practice:

"We've been given a lot of freedom to be creative in how we design things, which is nice. When I first started, that wasn't what I wanted—I needed someone to tell me exactly what to do because I'd never been a teacher before. Having that freedom was intimidating at first, but now I see how valuable it is—especially coming from industry—to choose what's most important in the career space and bring that to life for students. Our leadership has supported that by giving us the resources we need. We've been able to purchase all the supplies necessary to make our ideas work. I hear horror stories from other schools where teachers spend their own money or piece things together for labs that don't work because they lack the right materials. That has not been a problem here, and I'm thankful for that. "

- High School Teacher, Career/Technical Education

While educators' and leaders' readiness provides an important lens on capacity, the quality of CRS MBL implementation also depends on whether schools have established the building blocks of a competency-based system. For this reason, we next explore schools' progress in developing and organizing learning around competencies before turning to overall levels of implementation and practice shifts.

Competencies: Emerging, Not Fully Implemented

Competencies represent the core building blocks of a mastery-based system: they define what students are expected to know and be able to do, and they anchor the instructional and assessment practices that follow. Without clear, measurable, and student-friendly competencies, implementation of CRS MBL risks becoming fragmented, inconsistent across subjects, and disconnected from the larger goals of equity and transferability (Gagnon, 2023). For this reason, assessing schools' progress in establishing competency frameworks provides essential context for understanding the quality and level of implementation more broadly.

We surveyed school leaders, asking them to report on the stage their school was in with regard to organizing learning around competencies. Their response options were:

- We do not plan to organize learning around competencies.

- We plan to shift to competencies, but haven't started yet.

- Early phase of shifting to competencies.

- Intermediate phase of shifting to competencies.

- Fully organizing learning around competencies.

- I don't know where our school is in this process.

The percentage of schools in the intermediate and fully implemented stages of organizing learning around competencies increased, while those in the earliest planning stage dropped sharply.

Over the three years of data collection with school leaders, Cohort 1 schools demonstrated gradual, yet qualitatively uneven, progress in organizing learning around competencies.

- In Year 2, more schools (42%) reported being in the early stage of transitioning to competencies than the 32% that were in the intermediate stage and 13% that were fully organizing learning around competencies (Mean = 3.45, SD = 0.891).

- By Year 3, the share of schools in the early stage remained high (37%), while the proportion that reported no progress beyond planning increased from 13% to 26%. This indicates some stagnation or rethinking during Year 3 (Mean = 3.18, SD = 0.946).

- By Year 4, signs of renewed momentum appeared (Mean = 3.67, SD = 1.005). The percentage of schools in the intermediate (34%) and fully implemented (19%) stages increased, while those in the earliest planning stage dropped sharply. Notably, for the first time, only 3% of schools reported not planning to organize learning around competencies at all.

The differences in the typical stage of competencies implementation by year were statistically significant $[F_{(2, df)} = 3.457, p < .05]$. The post-hoc tests of mean differences confirmed that the most meaningful change occurred between Year 3 and Year 4, highlighting a rebound after the slowdown (Appendix A, Table A3). The observed effect size f is medium (0.22), indicating that the rebound represented a practically meaningful improvement rather than a marginal fluctuation.

One school leader described how their advanced competencies create pathways for authentic, community-centered, credit-bearing learning experiences.

"One thing that is a requirement before graduation is earning advanced competencies. Basically, students demonstrate skills they've learned at school out in the community. For leadership class, we consider this part of the community. Other ways they earn advanced competencies are through internships, working with community partners who come on campus, or even projects like our barber program—where students learned about the trade, practiced skills, and talked about entrepreneurship and what it's like to be a person of color owning a small business. They can also earn them through work at a family business, the skill center, or Running Start."

- High School, School Leader, Alternative School

These patterns show that although schools are gradually moving toward full competency implementation, the shift to competency-based structures is slow and nonlinear. As another school leader described,

"We've been slowly developing common principles over time—trying to codify the things we value, especially 21st-century skills. I don't like to call them 'soft skills,' but they're the kinds of skills students need outside of the curriculum, and in many ways, they're just as important—maybe even more important—than the curriculum itself. We've been spending a lot of time developing those."

- High School, School Leader, Alternative School

In another alternative school setting, a teacher explained the impact of this work on teaching and learning in his classrooms: *"these last two years have really helped me start to find the conversation between competency based education–we have our learning competencies–and aligning them with state academic standards. [I'm doing a] better job articulating what specific academic learning is happening with these students."*

Sturgis, Patrick, and Pittenger (2011) caution that without agreed-upon, transparent, and measurable competencies, competency-based implementation efforts risk becoming fragmented and uneven across classrooms and subject areas. Interviews with Cohort 1 teachers surfaced this challenge in some cases. One teacher described how, even within a single content-area team, there was little alignment on shared, cross-disciplinary competencies:

"We can't even agree on a curriculum… I would love to have common language in every science, social studies, and ELA classroom… because those are applicable to all three subject areas. But one person's doing RAD, one's doing CER, my partner and I do Evidence-Based Writing… we're all using different terminology for basically the same thing. The nuances in how it's taught and presented make a big difference; kids hear the same thing presented in two different ways and don't always realize it's the same concept."

- Middle School Teacher, Comprehensive/Traditional School

This kind of variation in discipline-specific terminology can also affect whether cross-discipline competencies are communicated in ways students can easily understand. A majority of school leaders (43%) indicated that competencies were "always" or "true most of the time," expressed in student-friendly language ("always" or "true most of the time"), with another 12% saying this was "always true." However, about 45% of school leaders reported that this is only "occasionally" or "often" true. About 50% of *students* reported that their learning goals were frequently explained at the start of a unit in ways they could understand. These findings suggest promising progress in defining and communicating competencies in student-friendly language, while also highlighting opportunities to increase consistency so that all students can clearly understand the learning goals guiding their progress.

Building on this, another important aspect of making competencies meaningful for students is ensuring they are organized into clear learning progressions that reflect increasing depth and complexity over time, so they know what mastery means. **About half (47%) of school leaders reported their schools frequently organized competencies into progressions** that reflect increasing depth and complexity over time. Nearly one in four (22%) reported this occurred only occasionally or not yet, suggesting opportunities to further strengthen the developmental design of competencies so that all students can clearly see their growth and understand next steps. Enhancing consistency in defining competency progressions and communicating them in student-friendly language could help more students—currently fewer than half—articulate their learning goals in each class and their progress toward mastery.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the need for continued professional learning. More importantly, it reinforces the importance of coordinated competency development support—alongside school-wide commitment and coherence. This is especially true for schools with a low level of implementation that were still in their foundational stages of learning in Year 4, to ensure competencies are clearly defined and organized into measurable progressions that guide student learning. State policies, such as Senate Bill 5189, which authorizes the development of a state-approved set of mastery-based competencies (Washington State Legislature, 2025), would alleviate the burden on districts and schools to design their own, enabling them to focus resources on implementation and instructional improvement.

CRSE MBL: Emerging, Not Fully Implemented

In this section, we explore the following question: *What was the depth and quality of MBL CRSE implementation across cohort 1 schools?* To do this, we first describe educators' self-reported frequency of MBL and CRSE implementation. We then report the overall level of implementation across the cohort, categorizing schools into three groups based on their perceived level of implementation (low, moderate, and high). We also examine a cross-sectional view of the Year 4 level of implementation through multiple perspectives, such as school size and baseline entry.

Implementation Quality: Frequency of CRS MBL Implementation

Now we turn our attention to teachers' perceptions of the widespread presence and growth of CRS MBL across classrooms. We asked teachers to report the frequency with which they were already implementing culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning strategies in their courses. The four-point response scale ranged from "not yet implementing any CRS MBL strategies in my classroom" to "consistently implementing CRS MBL strategies most or all of the time." On average, teachers reported they were "just beginning to implement a few CRS MBL strategies in my classroom" (Mean = 2.56, SD. = .874). These findings represent a marginal increase from their Year 3 responses, where teachers typically viewed their CRS MBL implementation as "just beginning" as well (Mean = 2.35, SD = 0.875). Although minor, the difference was statistically significant [$F_{(1, df)} = 7.852$, $p < .01$]. Because survey respondents varied from year to year, these findings should be viewed as cohort-wide trends rather than precise shifts among the same teachers.

> Cohort 1 demonstrated substantial progress in their implementation of MBL and CRSE strategies; however, their efforts were still in the early stages of the implementation continuum.

Likely, the slower pace at which schools were deepening their CRSE practices contributed to educators' more modest assessments of their progress toward fully integrating MBL and CRSE into classroom practices.

School leaders' perceptions support this interpretation. School leaders generally agreed that their schools were implementing MBL deeply (Mean = 3.48, SD = 1.147), but the average response for CRSE implementation was somewhat lower (Mean = 3.14, SD = 1.075). As previously reported, school leaders tend to offer more favorable assessments of implementation than educators, suggesting that overall perceptions of CRSE progress may be even more tempered at the classroom level.

We wanted to know if these patterns persisted across schools of all sizes. As illustrated in Figure 18, teachers in smaller schools reported implementing CRS MBL strategies more frequently than in "medium" and "medium-large" schools. About 70% of educators in "tiny" and "small" schools report already implementing CRS MBL strategies regularly or consistently, compared to less than 50% of educators in "medium" and "medium to large" schools who reported they were already regularly or

consistently implementing CRS and MBL strategies. This finding is consistent with the Year 3 findings (Levine, 2024).

Figure 18. Teachers' self-reported implementation of CRS MBL strategies, by school size
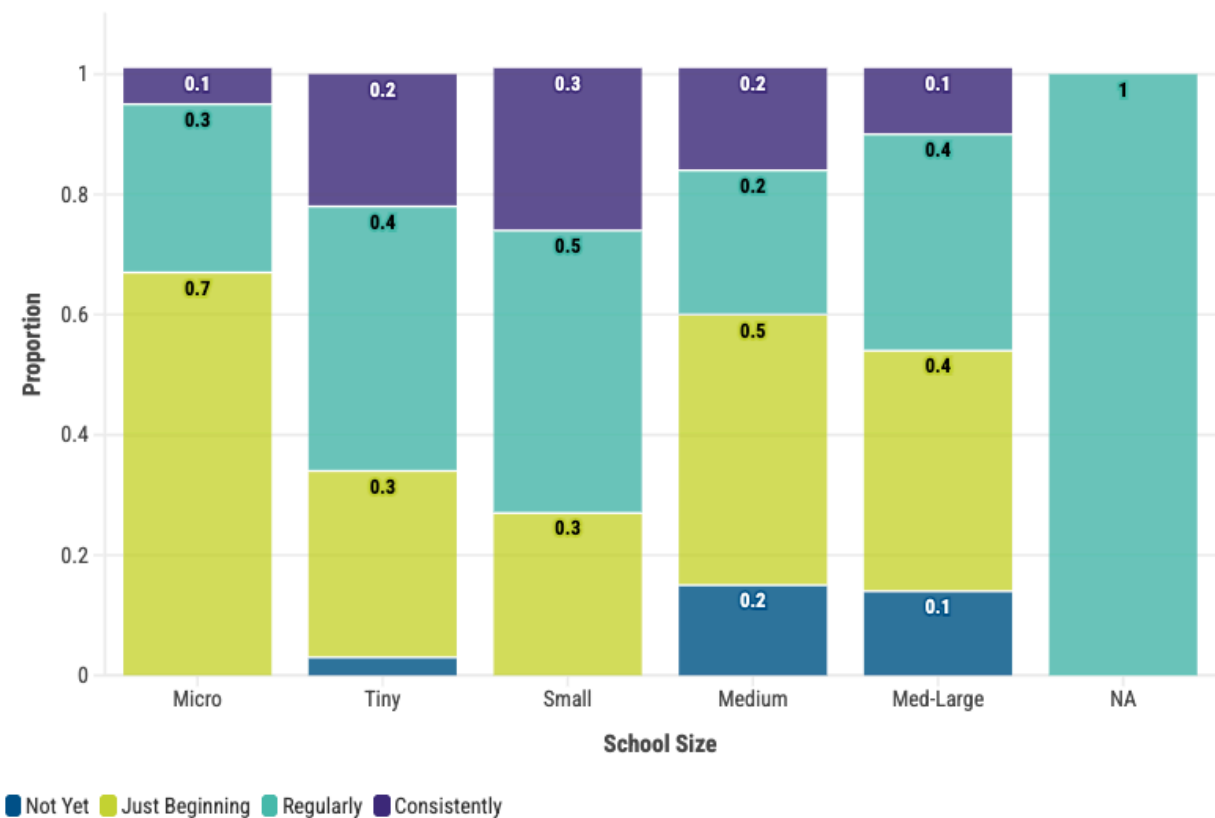
Source: MBLC Cohort 1 Teacher Survey 2025
Note: Micro" = less than 20 students per grade level; "Tiny" = 20 to 50 students per grade level; "Small" = 50-100 students per grade level; "Medium" = 100 to 200 students per grade level; "Medium to Large" = 200 to 400 students per grade level.

Implementation Quality: Overall Level of Implementation

Next, we examined the overall level of implementation (school- and classroom-level) using a combination of the two school leader survey items and one educator item reported in the methods section above. In Cohort 1, there were eight schools with a low level of implementation, six with a moderate level of implementation, and seven with a high level of implementation. As shown in Table 8, approximately 56% of students in the analytic sample attended schools with a low level of implementation, 31% attended schools with a moderate implementation level, and 13% attended schools with a high implementation level.

Table 8. Sample sizes, by level of implementation

Level of implementation	Number of schools	Number of students	Number of students in the analytic sample
Low	8[13]	4,672	2,504
Moderate	6	2,063	1,404
High	7	1,278	582

The level of CRS MBL implementation appears to differ based on school size. As shown in Table 9, schools with a lower level of implementation were more likely to be medium-large, enrolling between 200 and 400 students per grade (55% of low-implementing schools), while none of the schools with high implementation fall into this school size category. Conversely, high-implementing schools were mainly micro-sized or tiny (0–50 students per grade). There was one small school (50-100 students per grade). Moderate implementers were primarily found in micro and medium-large schools, with no representation from small or medium-sized schools. These patterns build on previous findings and indicate that smaller schools may provide more flexibility and cohesion in staff collaboration, decision-making, and instructional practices, which can help advance school-wide CRS MBL implementation, provided other supportive conditions are present, such as adequate staffing, leadership, and school-wide coherence. They also align with extant research showing that students in smaller schools (elementary and high school) often perform as well as, and in many cases better than, their peers in larger schools, particularly for economically disadvantaged students and students in historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups (Cotton, 1996; Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2006; Wasley et al., 2000). Researchers attribute these outcomes to several factors associated with small school environments, including stronger student–teacher relationships, greater personalization of instruction, increased opportunities for student participation and leadership, and a stronger sense of community and belonging.

> High-implementing schools tended to be micro-sized or tiny (encompassing 0–50 students per grade).
>
> Conversely, schools with a lower level of implementation were more likely to be medium-large, enrolling between 200 and 400 students per grade (55% of low-implementing schools).

Smaller schools have also been found to foster more coherent instructional practices, facilitate closer monitoring of student progress, and enable more responsive interventions when students struggle. However, the literature emphasizes that these benefits are most likely to occur when other enabling conditions are in place, such as strong instructional leadership, a clear and shared educational vision, coherent curriculum and assessment systems, sustained professional

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[13] There is one small alternative school in cohort 1 where the administrative data was combined with another high school in the same district. Therefore, for the purpose of this analysis those two schools were combined, leading to a sample size of 21 cohort 1 schools.

collaboration among staff, and equitable access to resources. More research is needed to determine if these patterns generalize to schools similar to MBLC schools.

Table 9. Level of implementation, by school size (sample sizes)

Level of Implementation	School Size/Student Survey Sample Sizes			
	Micro or Tiny (0-50 students per grade)	Small or Medium (50—200 students per grade)	Med-Large (200-400 students per grade)	Total
Low	190	1902	2580	4672
Medium	656	0	1407	2063
High	1013	265	0	1278

As illustrated in Figure 19, schools' Year 1 (end of 2022) self-assessments of school-wide implementation across *Equity Stance, MBL, and CRSE* varied meaningfully based on their Year 4 level of implementation. Schools that reached a high level of implementation in Year 4 began with stronger baseline self-assessments in at least two out of three CRS MBL domains, with many indicating stronger initial commitments to Equity and CRSE. These schools typically displayed more balanced and evenly distributed patterns of existing implementation in Year 1, indicating a strong foundation in equity-centered, MBL practices, and CRSE practices.

"I think that we have really identified CRSE as a foundational principle. And again, this is going before MBLC, and so it's given us some language around it. I would say for sure, we've done a lot of staff training and workshops around issues of equity and diversity and inclusion and racism and anti racism."

- High School Teacher, Alternative School, High Level of Implementation

In contrast, moderate implementers began with moderate self-ratings, exhibiting greater variability and uneven levels of implementation at the outset. While similar to moderate implementers, schools that achieved low implementation by Year 4 reported slightly lower CRSE self-assessment scores than moderate implementers, with most responses clustering on the left side of the continuum, pointing to early gaps or imbalances in school-wide implementation.

Figure 19. Schools' Year 1 self-assessments in Equity, MBL, and CRSE, by Year 4 implementation level
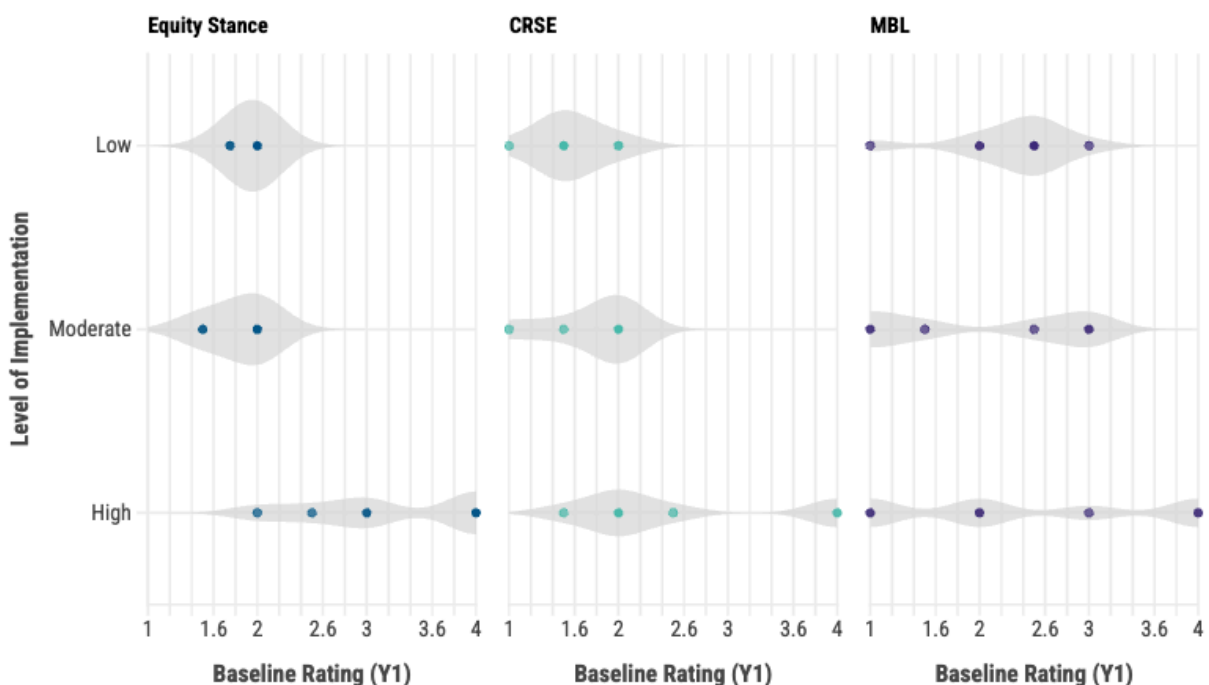
Source: Cohort 1 2022 work plans
Note: N schools "High" represented in graph = 7, N schools "Moderate" represented in graph = 6, N schools "Low" represented in graph = 8. Existing structures for each domain were self-assessed along a four-point continuum. For example, schools rated where they were on their path to a school-wide equity stance using the following scale: 1: New learning for us, 2: Early in acting on our shared commitment to equity, 3: Building a schoolwide equity stance, and 4: Deepening our schoolwide equity stance.

While most schools followed these general patterns, there were exceptions. A few schools that initially rated themselves lower in Equity, MBL, or CRSE went on to become high implementers by Year 4. Conversely, some schools that began with moderate self-assessments did not sustain their early momentum and were low implementers by Year 4. Factors such as leadership and staff stability, access to targeted professional learning and communities, ongoing coaching, and the ability to build a shared vision for change across multiple stakeholders may have played a significant role in driving strong implementation over time. This is especially important considering the leadership profile in MBLC Cohort 1 schools. While many school leaders had been in a leadership role for four years or more, **over half were relatively new leaders at their current school.** Where schools had stable, aligned leadership capable of leveraging that community knowledge, greater progress may have been more achievable.

One teacher from a high-implementation school attributed their school's strong foundation and continued progress in equity, MBL, and CRSE to the alignment between district policies and the surrounding community culture, both of which they described as "progressive." Still, the teacher

emphasized that leadership played the most significant role in sustaining the work. A temporary leadership change briefly disrupted the staff's momentum, but the arrival of a values-aligned principal enabled the school to reaffirm and strengthen its commitment to equity and student-centered learning.

A teacher in a moderate implementation school described their school's progress as partial but growing. They shared that while the full vision of mastery-based learning and culturally responsive practices was not yet fully embraced building-wide, most teachers understood and appreciated the direction of the initiative. Many classrooms in their school incorporated select elements, such as culturally responsive strategies, standards-based grading, or authentic assessment. Yet, implementation remained fragmented (a theme we will observe throughout this report). The teacher also emphasized that these practices were

> **In one school, as more of the staff received training in CRSE and MBL, schoolwide CRS MBL practices became more common, reinforcing the importance of ongoing, targeted professional learning.**

becoming more common as more staff receive targeted training. This perspective aligns with broader survey findings, which have shown that teachers' access to professional learning in CRSE and MBL has increased over time. It also reinforces the importance of ongoing, targeted professional learning. The teacher also noted that newer educators, especially those from local colleges, often bring stronger preparation in culturally responsive and inclusive practices.

It is also important to note that even within schools classified within a certain implementation category, there is still considerable variation among teachers. For example, in Figure 20, we see teachers' self-reported implementation of CRS MBL practices in Year 4. The figure is organized by implementation level, with schools showing an overall low level of implementation on the left and those with a high implementation level on the right. In every school, regardless of the overall level of implementation, some teachers report they are just beginning to implement CRS MBL strategies in their classrooms, while others say they do so regularly. Some patterns are clear. For instance, no teachers from schools in the "high" group indicated that they are not implementing any CRS MBL practices, but across the cohort, there is significant variability within schools.

Figure 20. Overall teacher self-reported implementation variability by school
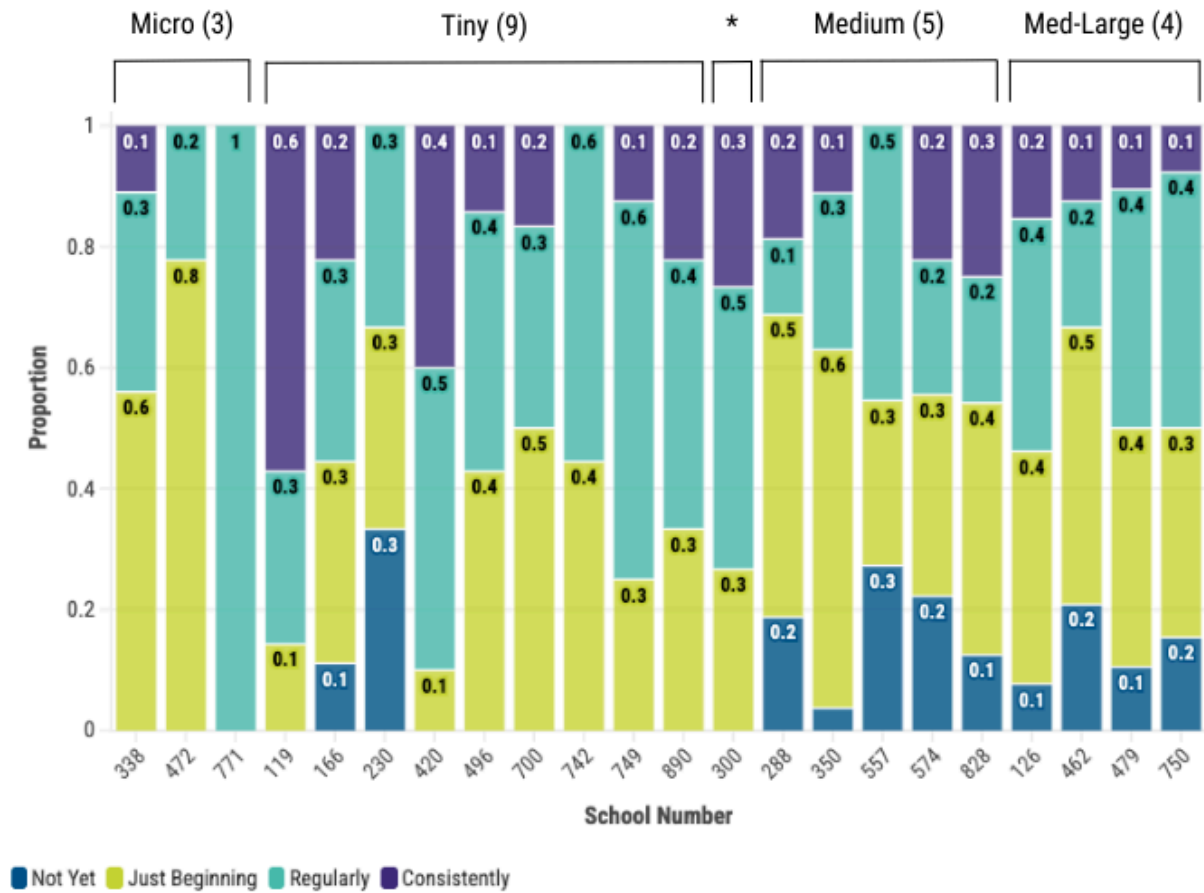
Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025
*Note: * = Small (1)*

These findings align with Year 3 results and a substantial body of research on teacher-to-teacher variation. Studies by Rockoff (2004) and Chetty, Freidman, and Rockoff (2014) demonstrate that teachers have lasting effects on students' academic and long-term outcomes. Therefore, strengthening the depth and quality of CRS MBL implementation *school-wide* is crucial to ensuring that every learner has access to practices and opportunities that lead to strong outcomes. Without school-wide accountability, students' experiences will vary widely. As one educator noted: *"In some classes, the MBL is strong; in others, teachers are doing what they've done for years and hiding in their classrooms. I feel much more engagement between the students and me, but as for the admin, the process feels disconnected."*

Taken together, these findings suggest that schools' initial conditions and, in some cases, broader community dynamics and support played a meaningful role in shaping their CRS MBL implementation trajectories. Notably, schools with a stronger Year 1 equity stance were more likely to deepen their practices over time, underscoring the importance of early commitments to equity and culturally responsive approaches as potential precursors to sustained, system-wide change.

We also revisited teachers' support of MBL and CRSE by implementation level. As we show in Figure 21, **a higher percentage of teachers in high-implementation schools (92%) support their school's plan to implement MBL than their counterparts** in moderate (73%) and low-implementation (69%) schools. However, a strong majority of teachers across all levels (74%) support their school's plan to implement MBL.

Figure 21. Teacher's support of school's plan to implement MBL
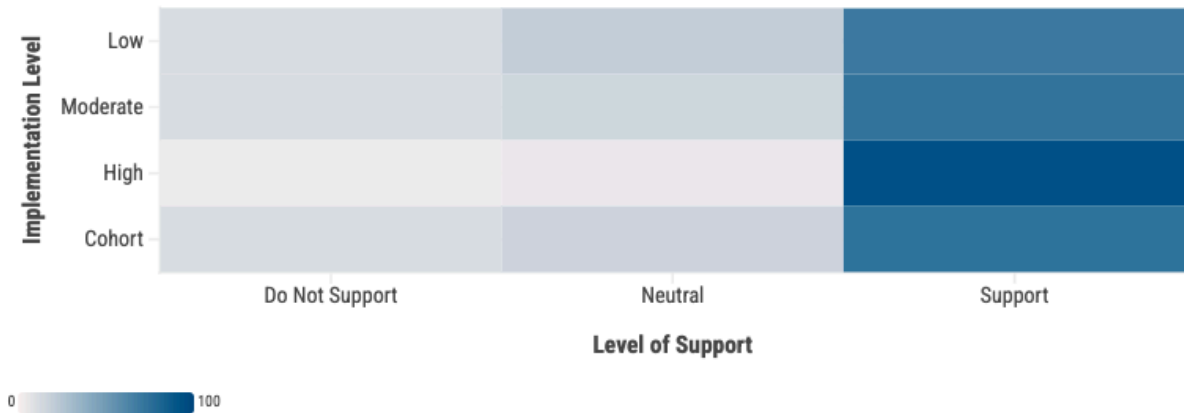
Source: MBLC Teacher Cohort 1 Survey 2025
Note: N=295. Sample size differs from the chart due to missingness for the "implementation level" variable.

The contrast between MBL support and CRSE support is stark (Figure 22). **Nearly all (97%) teacher survey respondents in high-implementation schools support their school's plan to implement CRSE**. While still a strong majority in low- (68%) and moderate-implementation (64%) schools, it is far less than in high-implementation schools.

Figure 22. Teacher's support of school's plan to Implement CRSE
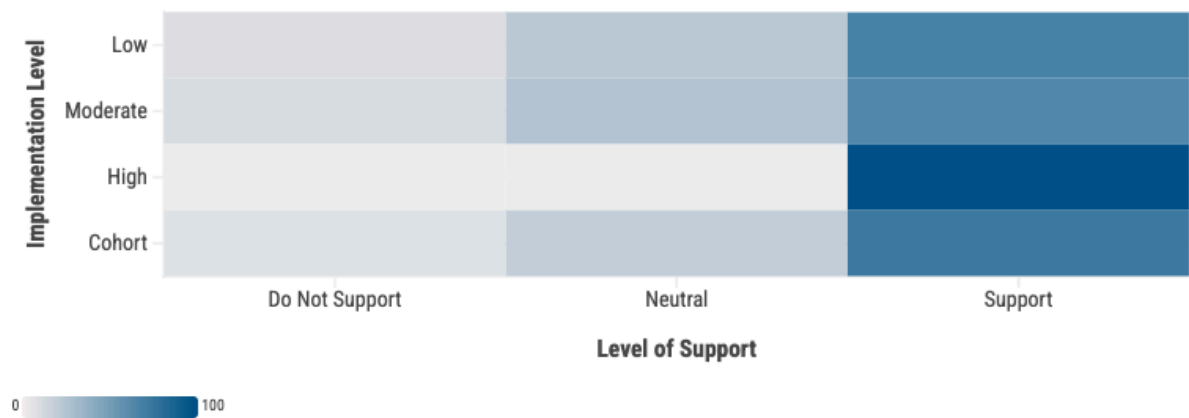
Source: MBLC Teacher Cohort 1 Survey 2025
Note: N=303; Sample size differs from chart due to missingness for the "implementation level" variable.

Teacher support is a critical indicator of implementation quality, and while most educators back their schools' efforts, the level of implementation clearly matters. In high-implementation schools, support for both MBL and CRSE is not only stronger but also more unified, **suggesting that as schools move beyond early stages, alignment among staff grows.** By contrast, the higher shares of "neutral" responses in low and moderate schools point to uncertainty or hesitation that could slow momentum, especially around CRSE practice shifts.

Teacher Practices: Emerging, Not Fully Implemented

In this section, we address the evaluation question: *Was participation in the MBLC associated with changes in educator practice?* We will also examine differences in educators' reported practices relative to students' perceived experiences. As this evaluation focuses on CRS MBL implementation, particular attention is given to shifts in instructional practices and students' perceptions of their learning as indicators of implementation quality. Any changes observed are not endpoints, but instead represent important implementation outcomes that indicate progress toward deeper, school-wide transformation (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Fostering Student Agency

First, we turn our attention to shifts in educators' application of instructional strategies that foster agentic learning. In a student-centered, mastery-based system, "students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning" (Levine & Patrick, 2019). Ideally, as systems become more mastery-based, teachers assume the role of a guide, enabling learners to take the driver's seat in their learning.

The complete results for each domain of analysis can be located in Appendix A (Table A4). In Year 4, we asked both teachers and students to reflect on who decides what activities students engage in during class, as well as who determines how and when students demonstrate their learning. Teacher survey results showed little statistically significant change from Years 2 to 4 in who decides daily classroom activities [$F_{(2, df)}$ =1.831, p = 0.16]. However, as shown in Figure 23, descriptive patterns show **growth in teachers' perceptions of shared daily classroom activity decision-making with students**. Students were more likely to say that teachers make those decisions without consulting them: 46% of students reported that teachers decide alone, compared to only 25% of teachers who reported that (Appendix B, Table B1).

Figure 23. Educator student agency practices (daily classroom topics and activities): Changes over time
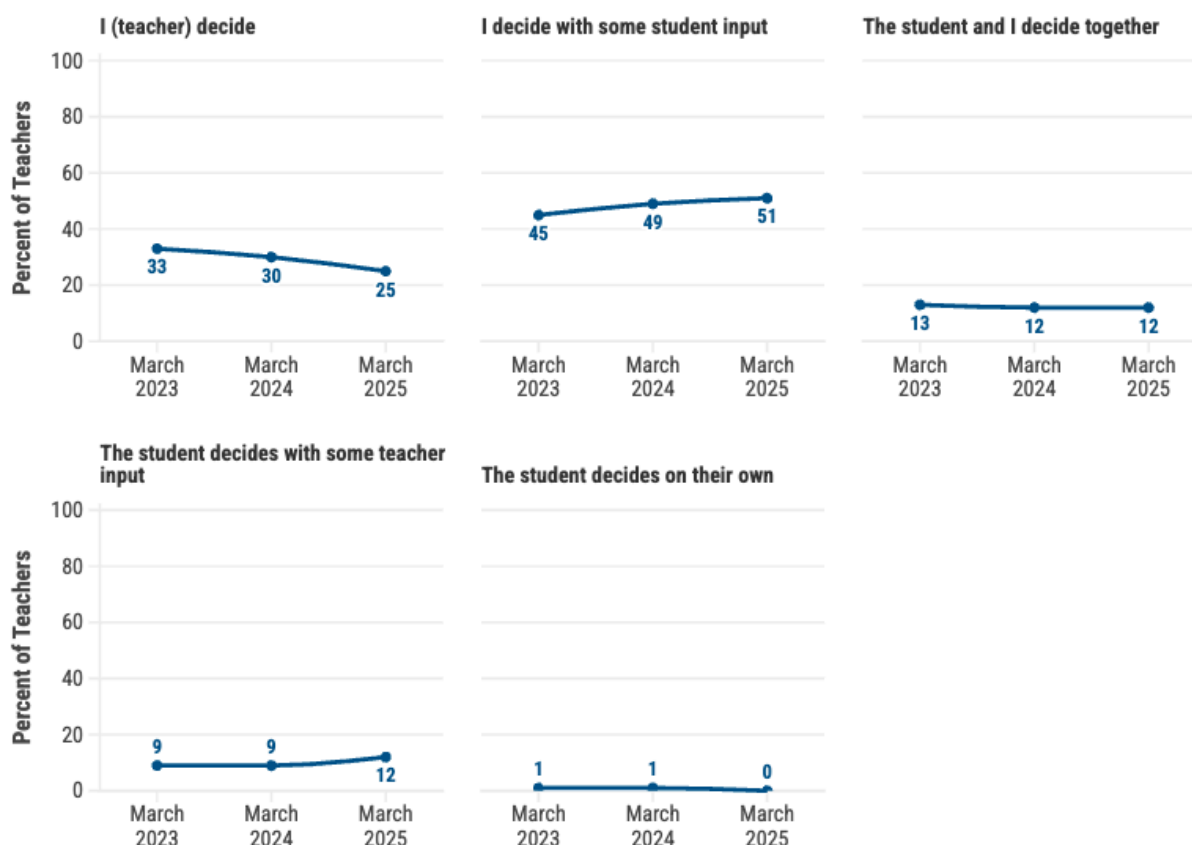
Source: MBLC Teacher Cohort 1 Survey 2024-2025

When asked about work completed outside of class, we found signs of growing student-led decision-making (Figure 24). Educators described creating more opportunities for autonomy in how students engage with out-of-class work (e.g., homework). Teacher mean scores from Years 2 through 4 showed a trend toward greater student autonomy, but the changes were not statistically significant [$F_{(2, df)}$ = 2.866, p = 0.06].

Student perceptions revealed a split: about one-third said teachers still determined the work entirely, while another third reported making those choices themselves (Appendix B, Table B2). This variation suggests **uneven progress toward shared ownership of learning, with some students experiencing genuine choice while others remain in more traditional, teacher-directed structures.**

Figure 24. Educator student agency practices (out-of-class work): Changes over time
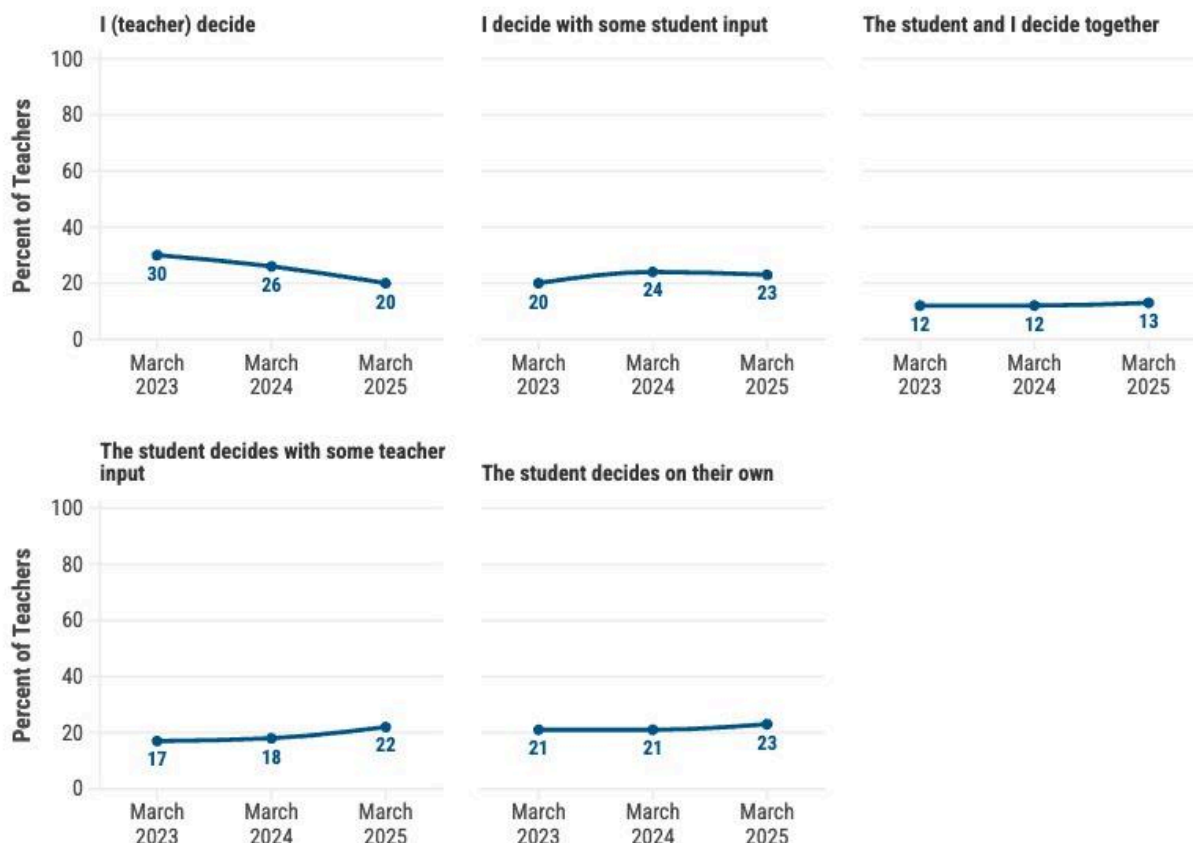
Source: MBLC Teacher Cohort 1 Survey 2024-2025

In terms of who decides how students demonstrate their learning, overall, teacher perceptions indicate progress toward more shared decision-making (Figure 25). **Teacher mean scores showed a statistically significant increase between Years 2 and 4, suggesting measurable progress toward more shared decision-making in how students demonstrate their learning over time** $[F_{(2, df)} = 4.012, p < .05]$. However, the effect size of .05 is small, indicating that the year of implementation explained less than 1% of the variance in responses.

However, we again see differences between student and teacher perceptions (Appendix B, Table B3). Notably, 16% of students reported that they decide on their own how they will demonstrate

learning, compared to only 2% of teachers who said that students make that choice independently. However, the responses between teachers and students were much more similar on the other end of the spectrum, with 58% of teachers and 59% of students reporting that the teacher decides the assessment format either alone or with some student input.

Figure 25. Educator Student Agency Practices (How Students Demonstrate Learning): Changes Over Time
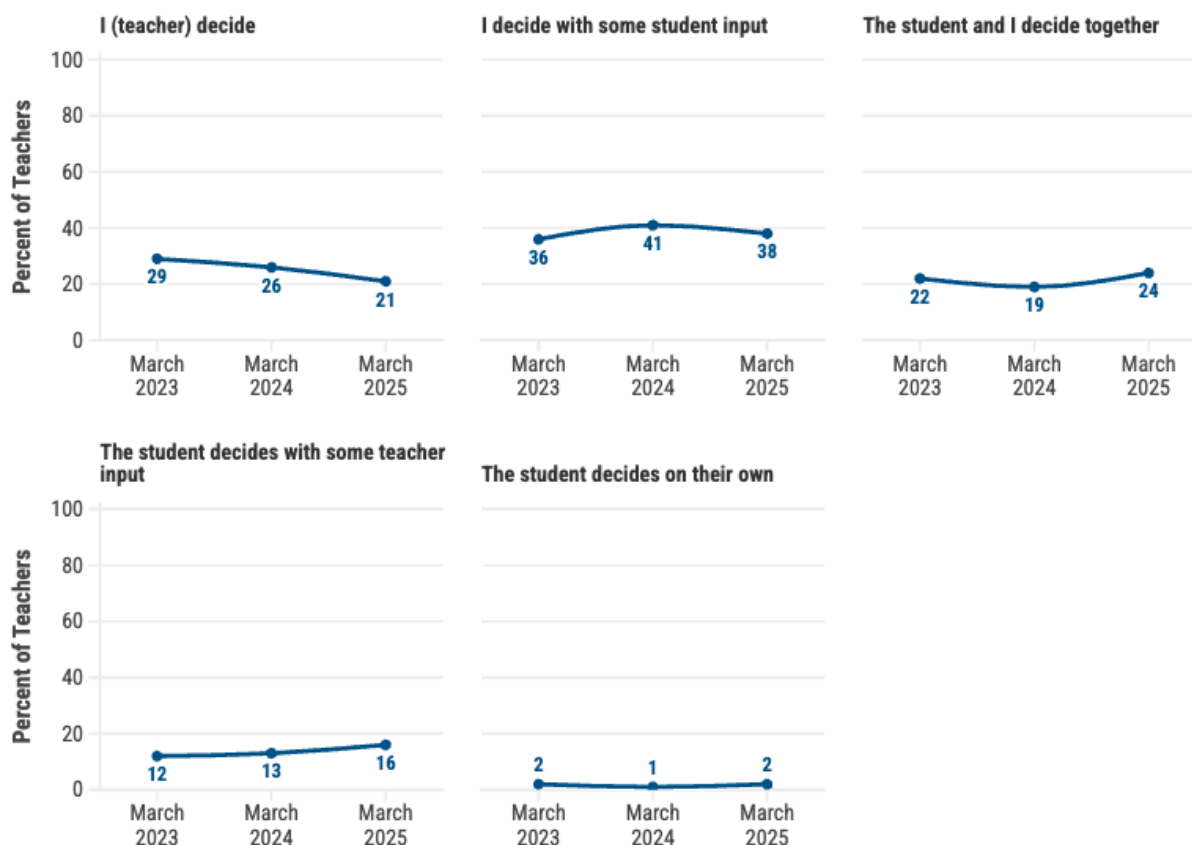
Source: MBLC Cohort 1 Teacher surveys 2023-2025.

Regarding the question of when students demonstrate mastery, as shown in Figure 26, even though teacher reports indicated a modest increase in collaboration with students over time, there was no statistically significant change from Years 2 through 4 [$F_{(2, df)} = 1.395$, $p = 0.25$]. Descriptively, 78% of teachers and 67% of students said that the teacher decides (either alone or with some student input) when students should demonstrate their learning (Appendix B, Table B4). However, the percentage of students who thought their teacher made the decisions without student input was similar to the percentage of teachers who had also observed that pattern (48% of students, compared to 44% of teachers).

Figure 26. Educator student agency practices (when each student takes an exam or final assessment): Changes over time
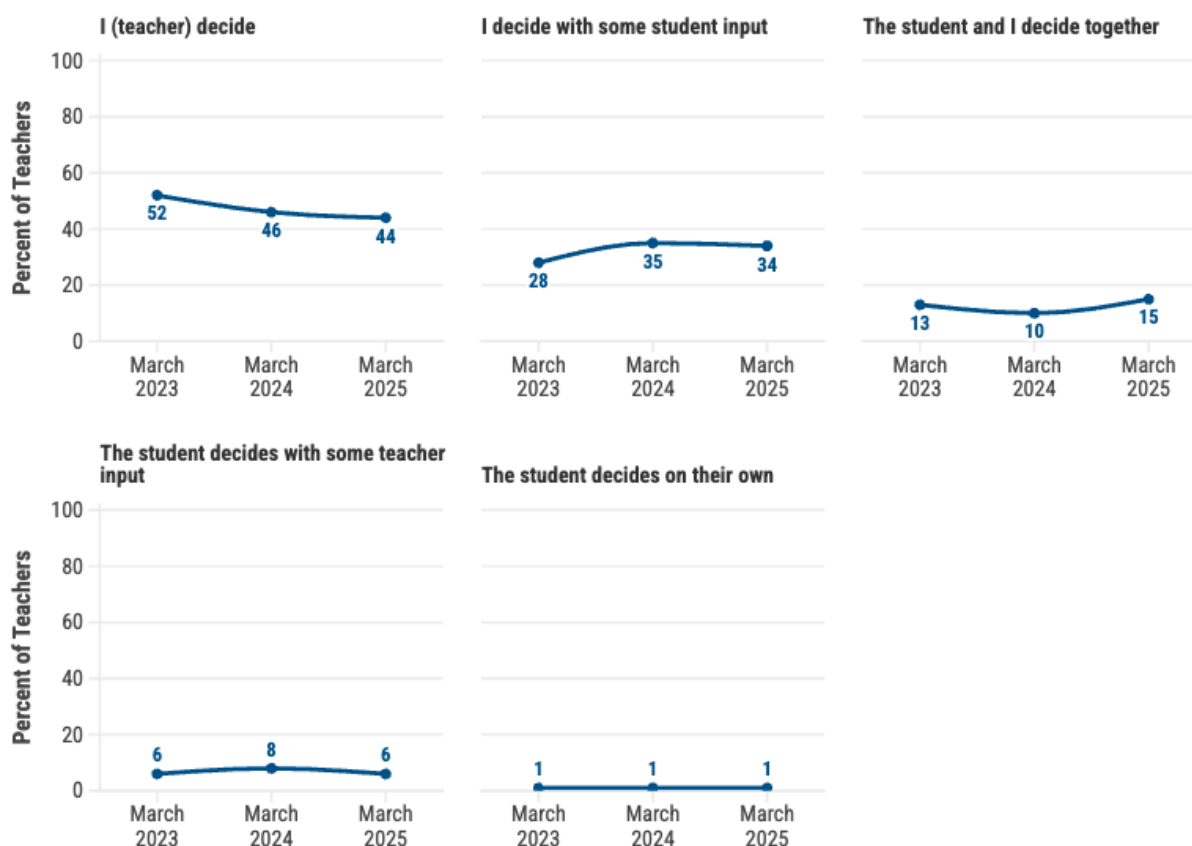
Source: MBLC Cohort 1 Teacher surveys 2023-2025.

In schools with a higher level of CRS MBL implementation, students are more likely to share decisions about their learning—an essential shift for adolescents building autonomy and agency.

Based on the previously described differences in implementation level, the question arises: Are teachers in high-implementation schools providing more opportunities for agentic learning than their counterparts? As shown in the figure below, in high-implementation schools, teachers rarely make decisions alone and are far more likely to share decision-making with students and provide opportunities for students to lead decision-making compared to low- and moderate-implementation schools (Figure 27).

Figure 27. Teacher instructional decision-making practices, by implementation level

Class Activities

	High	Moderate	Low
Teacher Decides	5%	26%	32%
Shared Decision	61%	68%	61%
Student Decides	34%	6%	7%

Homework

	High	Moderate	Low
Teacher Decides	5%	15%	28%
Shared Decision	69%	63%	50%
Student Decides	26%	23%	22%

Assessment Format

	High	Moderate	Low
Teacher Decides	6%	20%	27%
Shared Decision	87%	80%	72%
Student Decides	6%	0%	1%

Assessment Timing

	High	Moderate	Low
Teacher Decides	19%	41%	55%
Shared Decision	66%	59%	44%
Student Decides	3%	0%	1%

■ Teacher Decides ■ Shared Decision ■ Student Decides

Source: MBLC Cohort 1 Teacher survey 2025

Overall, patterns across opportunities for student voice and choice reveal a clear trend: there is a trend toward more shared decision-making. However, teacher-led learning remains dominant in low-implementation schools, while moderate- and high-implementation schools show more evidence of shared decision-making. These differences matter developmentally. Nearly 88% of participating students were in early or middle adolescence (ages 12–17), a stage marked by rapid cognitive, social, and emotional growth. **Emerging opportunities for voice and choice in higher-implementation schools suggest that these environments are beginning to align with adolescents' developmental needs for autonomy, agency, and meaningful participation in their learning.** The following are examples of these opportunities:

- [Student Choice in Instruction] In one project, students were presented with a range of current event topics and, as a class, selected the top four to study. Each student then chose which of those four they wanted to explore more deeply. This design not only encouraged ownership and engagement but also provided an important safeguard: students could opt out of topics that might feel personally distressing while still participating fully in the learning experience. In this way, the project balanced academic rigor with sensitivity to students' lived realities, ensuring that all students had both a voice in shaping the curriculum and agency in their own learning.

- [Student Choice and Voice in Scheduling] Students described how the school's scheduling "grid" helped them visualize course options and requirements for graduation. With advisor support, they could identify what they needed to complete, while also making choices that balanced workload and interests. For example, one student paired a challenging academic course with an art class. This structure provided both clarity on requirements and flexibility to design a schedule that aligned with their goals and capacities.

- [Student Voice in School Improvement] One student shared how a peer proposed creating a survey on the school library's webpage where classmates could provide feedback on school activities and assemblies. The idea was that students could suggest what worked well and what could be improved, and school leaders could use that input to shape future events more closely around student interests. Although still in development, this initiative illustrates how students are generating their own mechanisms for contributing to school decision-making.

These results may reflect, in part, opportunities to support educators in low-implementation schools in shifting their mindsets about students' capacity to own their learning and provide strategies and tools to facilitate that process. One educator reflected on this challenge, noting that while they aim to give students more voice in how they learn, it can be hard to step back from the belief that, as trained professionals, teachers know what is best for students who "don't have the knowledge to really be choosing what is best for them." Another voiced concern is that students have not yet developed the skills to take ownership, observing that "many fail to meet deadlines" and fearing that, without these habits, they will struggle in high school, college, or the workplace. A school leader added that new students often struggle most with being asked what they want,

because "no one's ever asked them before." In traditional schools, they may get to choose an elective or CTE course, "but they don't really get a choice on much of anything else." The leader recalled alumni visiting from college over winter break and remarking on "how crazy it is that their classmates really struggle with this idea of, like, what do you want to do?" Together, these perspectives reveal a core tension in CRS MBL implementation: balancing the shift toward honoring student voice, lived experience, and autonomy with ensuring students have the skills and structures needed to succeed in these behaviors.

Providing Meaningful Assessments

In a student-centered, mastery-based system, "assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence" (Levine & Patrick, 2019). Mastery-based assessment systems are designed to be balanced, incorporating opportunities for students to monitor their progress toward mastery and demonstrate mastery in affirming and meaningful ways. In this evaluation, we focused on changes in teachers' mastery-based summative assessment policies and practices, as these are hypothesized to most clearly distinguish mastery-based approaches from traditional models, thereby giving us insights into the unique assets and challenges of MBL implementation. At the same time, to reinforce the importance of formative assessment within a balanced system, we also report findings related to educator and student experiences with formative assessment. We will begin by examining changes in summative assessment policies and practices as reported by teachers and students. Then we will explore changes in formative assessment policies and practices, as well as in the types of assessment used for summative and formative purposes.

Summative Assessment Policies and Practices

Summative assessments measure what students have learned at the end of an instructional period. They typically contribute to a final grade, determine credit eligibility in high school, or—in the case of standardized state assessments—inform decisions about student promotion and retention. Assessments used for summative purposes often require more foundational shifts in grading policies, expectations, and structures to be implemented effectively, especially when students do not meet their schools' minimum standards for mastery. Figure 28 illustrates the evolution of teachers' summative assessment policies.

Figure 28. Educators' summative assessment policies: Changes in "most of the time" or "always"
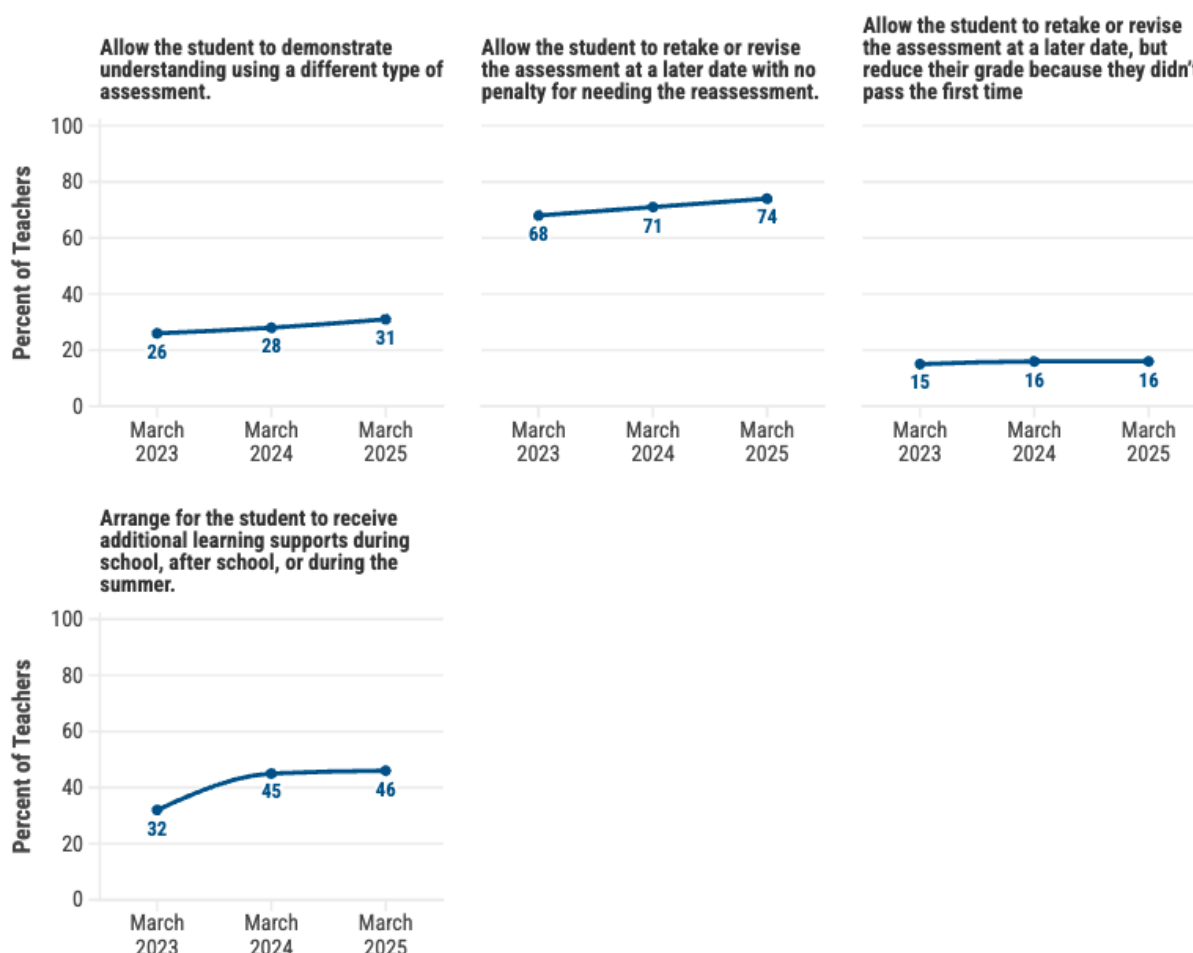
Source: MBLC Cohort 1 Teacher survey 2025
Note. The stem for all graphs is "When students do not meet your school's minimum performance levels on the summative assessments in your course (i.e., they do not pass), how often do you take the following actions?"

75% of teachers allowed summative assessment retakes without penalty, marking a strong shift toward mastery-based pedagogy.

At the same time, more than 60% of teachers *rarely* arrange structured supports outside class time based on assessment results, leaving many students without timely opportunities to act on feedback.

Notably, almost 75% of teachers reported that they *"most of the time"* or *"always"* allow students to retake or revise a summative assessment without penalty. Such retake opportunities hold the potential to deepen learning and foster a sense of agency when supported by clear structures and intentional design.

Inferential tests of mean differences confirmed that teacher survey mean scores in this area showed no statistically significant change from Years 2 to 4 [$F(2, 1203) = 2.10$, $p = .12$]. The cohort mean scores ranged from 3.96 to 4.14 on a 5-point scale, where a '4' means most of the time. This stability suggests that **retake policies were already well established across schools and**

remained consistently applied. Such retake opportunities hold the potential to deepen learning and foster a sense of agency when supported by clear structures and intentional design. However, it can be difficult to sustain a flexible retake policy absent these structures, given the demands on teachers' time and capacity. For example, one student attending a vocational/career and technical school that had moderately implemented CRS MBL by Year 4 shared what the retake process looks like when there are adequate processes and structures in place:

"We can retake the assessment. We have to go through the questions, do our research, find out, like, why we got it wrong, what was the right answer, and put that all in, like, a document to show our teacher, and then we can retake it."

- High School Student

However, a teacher in a traditional/comprehensive school context noted the challenge and burden of allowing for different demonstrations of learning in combination with a flexible retake policy:

"I feel overwhelmed at the thought of having many different summative tests at the same time. Sometimes, I feel like my students don't prepare adequately for the first test and are asking when the retake is before they even take it. That can be frustrating and more work on my end."

- Middle School Teacher

There was also a marked difference in the percentage of teachers who reported they arranged for students to receive additional learning supports during school, after school, or during the summer when students do not meet their school's minimum performance levels on the summative assessments in a course. In Year 2, only 32% of teachers shared this policy. By Year 4, 46% of teachers adopted this policy. Mean differences were statistically significant, but perhaps not meaningfully so. Descriptively, there was an increase in teachers arranging additional learning supports during or outside of school, on average [$F(2, 1202) = 13.32$, $p < .01$, $f = .15$]. In traditional educational settings, students who fail to demonstrate proficiency on summative assessments often face limited options, such as repeating a course or, more commonly, advancing without mastering the material. By contrast, the **increasing use of structured supports within and beyond the school day suggests movement toward a more responsive mode**l, where summative assessment results activate timely opportunities for re-engagement with content rather than punitive consequences. Yet still, roughly 60% of teachers say they rarely arrange for students to receive additional learning supports during school, after school, or during the summer. See Appendix A, Table A5 for the complete set of ANOVA results.

These patterns point to a gradual shift in the use of summative assessment toward more supportive practices, but they also highlight the limits of relying on summative data alone, which often comes too late to meaningfully redirect learning. This gap underscores the importance of

formative assessment practices, which provide ongoing, real-time insights that allow both teachers and students to make timely adjustments and better support progress toward mastery.

Formative Assessment Practices

Research has shown that assessments and feedback used for formative purposes improve learning more effectively than many other educational interventions, with the greatest gains seen among lower-achieving students (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The literature also suggests that formative assessment is most effective when students are not passive recipients of feedback but active participants in assessing their progress, setting learning goals, and identifying next steps (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Wylie & Lyons, 2015). These practices foster metacognition (reflection on learning), motivation, and ownership.

To understand how formative assessment policies and practices evolved across MBLC schools, we drew on two complementary sources of evidence. In Year 2, teachers reported on their own policies and practices, providing an early glimpse into how formative assessment was being implemented. By Year 4, comparable teacher survey data were not collected; however, student responses provide

Students in Cohort 1 schools consistently use teacher feedback to reflect on their progress—but other formative practices, like self-assessment, practice quizzes, or re-teaching, remain uneven and infrequent.

a valuable perspective on how frequently these practices were experienced in classrooms. While the two data points are not directly comparable, together they illustrate both the policies that teachers reported adopting early on and the ways in which students later perceived formative assessment shaping their learning.

In Year 2, teachers were asked: *"When a student takes a formative assessment and has not yet reached your school's minimum required performance level, how often do you engage in the following practices?"* As shown in Table 10, they most often reported giving students additional time (72% "most of the time" or "always") or reteaching material in a different way (59%). Peer support was also common, with nearly half of teachers arranging it "most of the time" or "always." By contrast, directing students to structured school-level supports, such as enrichment periods or writing and math centers, occurred far less frequently. More than 60% of teachers said they "never" or only "occasionally" used these options. The relatively limited use of structured *school-level* supports is noteworthy because such systems can provide more equitable and sustainable access to help, reduce the burden on individual teachers, and ensure students receive specialized assistance that may not be feasible within the classroom alone.

Table 10. Educator practices when students do not meet minimum standards (Year 2)

Teacher response	N	Never	Occasionally	Often	Most of the Time	Always
Give the student more time to work on the learning outcomes	414	0%	10%	19%	28%	44%
Help the student learn the material in a different way	413	1%	16%	24%	30%	29%
Have the student work with another student who understands the material well	413	1%	23%	29%	28%	18%
Direct the student to use the school's support/enrichment block or period	408	20%	21%	19%	20%	20%
Direct the student to utilize the school's Writing/Math Center or similar program	402	43%	19%	16%	11%	11%

As shown in Table 11, students tended to report experiencing formative feedback practices only "sometimes." However, one notable exception emerged. Over half of the students indicated that they "most of the time" or "always" use feedback from their teacher to reflect on their progress toward a learning goal. This suggests that while formative assessment practices are not yet pervasive, teacher feedback plays a more consistent role in supporting student reflection on their learning. This also points to a foundational shift aligned with the goals of culturally responsive formative assessment, which emphasizes feedback as a process of engagement rather than judgment.

Table 11. Student experiences with formative assessment practices

Student Survey	N	Never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
I show my level of understanding to my teacher using a quick check-in (like an exit slip or thumbs up/down).	4331	11%	19%	40%	24%	6%
I review my own work to see how much I have learned.	4335	12%	20%	36%	24%	8%
I give feedback on my classmates' work.	4305	16%	23%	39%	17%	6%
I take practice quizzes to see if I am ready to show that I have mastered a learning goal.	4320	16%	22%	34%	21%	7%
I use feedback from my teacher to reflect on my progress towards a learning goal.	4322	6%	11%	32%	34%	18%
If I have not yet mastered a learning goal…						
I get more time to work on the learning goal.	4296	11%	31%	32%	20%	6%
My teacher helps me learn the material in a different way.	4286	15%	22%	34%	21%	8%
I get help from a classmate who has already mastered the learning goal.	4284	14%	17%	33%	27%	9%
I get support from an adult outside of class time.	4274	21%	22%	26%	18%	13%

Note: MBLC Student Survey 2025

In light of these findings, we return to the teacher who expressed concern that students often appeared unprepared for initial summative assessments or lacked motivation, knowing they would have opportunities to retake them. While 32% of students reported reviewing their work to see how they have learned "most of the time" or "always," 68% reported doing so infrequently or not at all. Additionally, 72% of students reported rarely or never taking practice quizzes to check their readiness to demonstrate mastery. It remains unclear whether this reflects a lack of preparation, limited opportunities for practice, or both.

The teacher's concern may reflect a broader need for structures that help students engage more meaningfully with their learning: through reflection, self-assessment, and a clearer sense of progress. Only 29% of students said that if they fail the first time, their teacher helps them learn the material in a different way. These results suggest an opportunity to move beyond traditional tools, such as practice quizzes, toward formative assessment practices that are more relational,

personalized, and culturally responsive. These include building learning partnerships with adults outside of class time, engaging students in dialogue about their growth, and fostering authentic reflection. These are practices that not only support mastery but also deepen student motivation and sense of agency.

Assessment Formats

Performance assessments, when thoughtfully designed and implemented, can provide more authentic, affirming, and personalized opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning. These assessments hold particular promise in culturally responsive and sustaining, mastery-based environments because they allow for application, relevance, transparency, and student voice. In describing their assessment practices, one 8th-grade teacher explained that his students' inquiry projects and essays were evaluated using rubrics, with results shared with both students and families. Students were invited to review his ratings and provide feedback on whether they felt the evaluation was fair. While rubrics were used consistently, the teacher noted that formal quizzes were not part of the current approach but may be incorporated in future years.

As shown in Table 12, **teachers demonstrated an increased adoption of more authentic, student-centered assessment practices, such as personally meaningful projects, while also maintaining their traditional assessment methods.** Over time, mean score differences were statistically significant for shifts in educators' reliance on traditional tests [$F(2, 1200) = 3.62$, $p < .05$, $f = .10$] and in enabling student choice in assessment formats [$F(2, 1200) = 7.39$, $p < .01$, $f = .10$]. Both effects were small, suggesting modest but noteworthy progress. See Appendix A, Table A6 for complete ANOVA results.

Table 12. Educator assessment format practices: Changes over time

"Most of the time" or "Always"...	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Students are assessed with traditional tests (such as multiple choice, true-false, short answer questions).	49%	42%	56%
Students are assessed with performance-based assessments such as complex real-world tasks or personally meaningful projects.	37%	37%	44%
Students can choose how they want to be assessed from multiple options (such as taking a written or verbal test, writing a paper, completing a project, or making a presentation).	10%	16%	17%

Note. MBLC Teacher Survey 2025

Student survey results reinforce this pattern. When asked to report how frequently they "show what [they] have learned by applying it (like to a project or real-world situation)" summatively, only 37% indicated they do this in their classrooms *"most of the time"* or *"always."* Just about the same percentage (34%) reported they do this *"sometimes."* Taken together, these findings highlight both the promise and the challenge of shifting toward authentic assessments, which demand significant

instructional adjustments as well as coherent systems and shared norms to take root consistently. One teacher described entering a classroom with no foundational structures for assessment:

"When I came in, there was not a clear, cohesive idea of what we do in a day. What and how do we assess? And so [I had] to rebuild that, establish a culture of feedback and assessment. I had to kind of build that with the kids."

- High School Teacher

However, **the effective use of performance assessments requires careful attention to structure, scaffolding, and classroom routines.** One educator raised concerns about the reliability and integrity of performance assessments used for formative learning (e.g., portfolio assessments) and feedback in their classroom, noting:

"I think the learning and assessments in context are more authentic—but students (at least 9th graders) are often seen copying from each other during project work...getting authentic data can be a challenge sometimes."

- High School Teacher

This reflection highlights a critical tension in the implementation of performance assessment. While performance assessments, particularly those embedded in project-based learning, are intended to increase authenticity, they may fall short of this goal without clear expectations regarding collaboration and individual contributions, student buy-in, and guardrails to ensure individual accountability. These challenges are particularly salient in the early stages of implementation, or in learning environments that are still developing shared norms around rigor, pacing, and feedback. This finding also aligns with broader patterns in the data, as most Cohort 1 schools entered the initiative new to MBL or building capacity for its implementation and were still in the developing stages of CRS MBL implementation (i.e., "just beginning") at Year 4.

In high-implementation schools, 70% of teachers consistently use performance-based assessments and 82% rarely rely on traditional tests.

This exceeds the cohort-wide pattern, where only 44% of teachers report consistent use of performance-based assessments.

Notably, teachers in high-implementation schools have largely shifted from traditional tests to performance-based assessments. Moderate- and low-implementation schools continue to rely on traditional formats far more frequently.

Rubrics for Learning

The aforementioned findings underscore the need for reliable tools that both capture authentic learning and maintain consistency. When paired with performance assessments, rubrics can be a

powerful tool for achieving that end. Rubrics are widely used across subjects to structure expectations, guide feedback, and promote student reflection. Cohort 1 teachers emphasized that their effectiveness depends on how they are designed and applied.

Teachers in one high school described both the promise and challenges of using rubrics across subjects. Several noted that while shared "power standards" and common rubrics across departments remain a long-term goal, **current practice varies widely.** In math, teachers reported rewriting textbook assessments and revising rubrics to clarify what mastery entails, which they felt improved both teacher and student understanding of expectations. Other teachers described using rubrics in project-based classes, such as woodworking and science labs, to guide self-assessment, encourage reflection, and promote iterative learning. Teachers also highlighted the value of having students grade themselves against rubrics—noting they are often more stringent than teachers—which fosters ownership of learning. At the same time, they acknowledged **inconsistencies in how rubrics are used across departments and the ongoing work needed to align standards, expectations, and assessment tools schoolwide.**

Similar reflections emerged in our conversations with teachers from one middle school. These teachers described rubrics as central to clarifying expectations and aligning instruction with standards, but also highlighted persistent challenges in design, consistency, and student use.

- One teacher explained how students sometimes help translate standards into objectives and even draft simple rubrics, noting that **shared language around rubrics strengthens professional learning community collaboration and alignment across departments**.

- Another emphasized the importance of providing rubrics upfront to promote student voice and choice, while acknowledging that many younger students struggle to interpret and apply rubrics independently.

- A third teacher highlighted the tensions between rubric-based assessment and traditional grading systems, describing efforts to align rubrics directly with standards so that grades reflect mastery rather than seat time or point accumulation.

Two teachers from another Cohort 1 alternative high school emphasized the use of rubrics as essential tools for tracking progress, clarifying expectations, and balancing formative and summative assessments. One described using rubrics consistently to monitor student work while acknowledging the need for greater consistency in application. The other highlighted efforts involved translating standards into student-friendly language and tying them directly to deliverables, utilizing rubrics to guide self-assessment, feedback, and opportunities for revision. While rubrics are widely used across units and projects, **teachers noted that consistency varies across pathways and that practices are often adapted from colleagues rather than fully standardized**.

Across their perspectives, rubrics were seen as powerful tools for equity, clarity, and student ownership, but also as works-in-progress that require careful scaffolding and system-level shifts in grading. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge a pocket of educators who believe their current practices already achieve these goals and therefore see little need to shift in this direction:

"I believe that MBLC should be used by those that struggle to connect with kids and have a tendency to make things black/white. Veteran teachers with a knack for connecting with students feel as though jumping through the hoops of MBLC is kind of insulting. I pride myself in understanding all facets of the kiddos I teach (backgrounds, socio-economic, culture, etc). I don't need rubrics to make my learning more valuable."

- Middle School Teacher

While this perspective highlights real concerns about professional autonomy and respect for veteran practice, it also underscores the importance of clear communication about the purpose of mastery-based learning. Many educators reported that **when mastery-based practices are framed as tools for equity and student agency, they can complement rather than diminish teachers' professional expertise.**

Providing Differentiated Support

In CRS MBL, "students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs" (Levine & Patrick, 2019). Differentiation ensures each student has the support and instructional interventions they need to act on that feedback and continue their progress towards mastery. Advancing differentiated support requires a deep understanding of students' individual interests, motivations, and learning preferences. This is very much consistent with Ladson-Billings' first pillar: "students must experience academic success" (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When educators co-design learning experiences with students that are relevant to who students are and how they learn best, they increase the likelihood that all students, not just those already positioned for success, can access rigorous content, build competence, and see themselves as capable learners.

When we asked students to report the extent to which their teachers personalize their learning experiences along several dimensions, we found that **students were more likely than not to experience learning that builds on what they already know and are interested in** (Table 13). This is a promising indicator, suggesting progress toward personalized learning; however, the full realization of varied, student-driven learning pathways is still in development. Given that most schools began their MBLC journey in the early stages of implementation, this finding is consistent with what we might expect in systems undergoing foundational change.

Table 13. Student exposure to student–centered learning practices

In this section, we're going to ask how much your learning at school is personalized to you and your unique preferences, strengths, and needs.	N	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My teachers explain what we are learning in different ways	4381	5%	12%	33%	41%	8%
My teachers use what I already know to help me understand new ideas	4372	3%	7%	26%	49%	14%
My teachers treat every student like they are important members of the classroom	4389	5%	8%	29%	38%	20%
My teachers try to find out what interests me	4379	8%	15%	34%	31%	11%
My teachers use interesting examples to help me learn	4378	6%	11%	34%	38%	12%

Source: MBLC Student Survey 2025

Figure 29 illustrates how educators prioritized differentiated support and the extent to which these practices strengthened over the course of their schools' participation in the MBLC. As shown, teachers made the most progress in offering just-in-time, personalized supports and instruction tailored to students' needs, regardless of their overall performance level. Complete ANOVA results can be found in Appendix A, Table A7. Teacher reports indicated steady growth in opportunities for student choice and access to personalized supports from Years 2 to 4.

Figure 29. Educator practices in differentiated support: Changes in "most of the time" or "always"
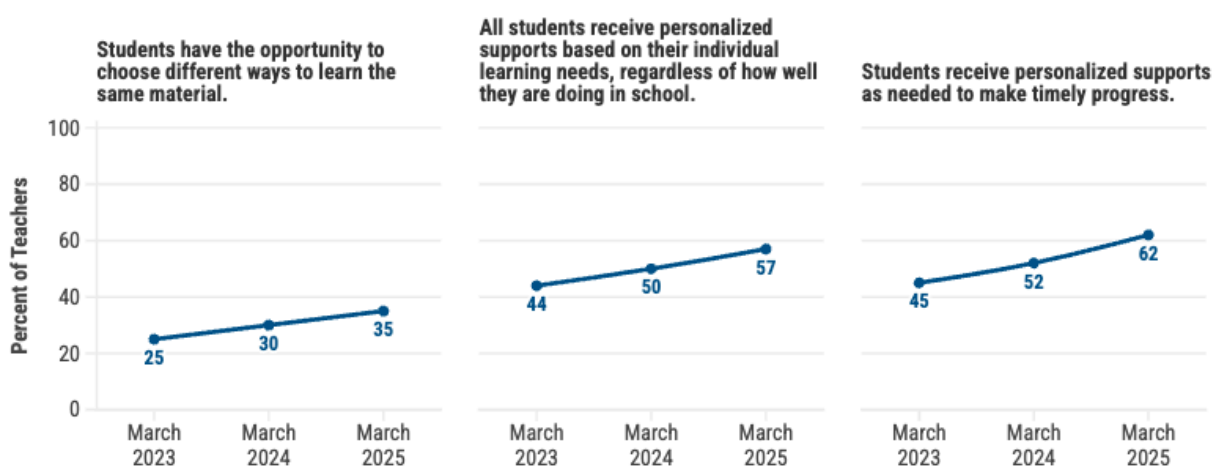
Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025

Teachers increasingly reported giving students options for how they learn the same material (e.g., lectures, group discussions, projects, or online work). Mean scores rose from 2.70 in Year 2 to 2.99 in Year 4, a statistically significant shift [$F(2, 1211) = 7.87$, $p < .01$, $f = .10$]. Post-hoc tests showed meaningful differences between Years 2 and 3 ($p < .05$) and between Years 2 and 4 ($p < .01$). Although

the effect size was small, the pattern suggests modest but consistent progress toward diversifying learning modalities.

Teacher reports of providing personalized supports to all students, regardless of performance level, also increased significantly over time [$F_{(2, 1213)} = 8.35$, $p < .01$, $f = .12$]. Teachers in Year 4 (Mean = 3.66) were significantly more likely than those in Year 2 (Mean = 3.30) or Year 3 (Mean = 3.45) to endorse this practice, with pairwise differences reaching statistical significance between Years 2 and 4 ($p < .01$) and between Years 3 and 4 ($p < .05$).

The most pronounced gains were observed in supports provided to help students make timely progress [$F_{(2, 1212)} = 12.87$, $p < .01$, $f = .15$]. Teacher mean scores increased from 3.36 in Year 2 to 3.77 in Year 4, with significant differences between Years 2 and 4 ($p < .01$) and between Years 3 and 4 ($p < .01$). Although the effect size was still small-to-medium, this represents a consistent upward trend in responsive instructional practices.

Nearly 90% of teachers in high-implementation schools reported that all students receive individualized supports "most of the time" or "always," regardless of performance level.

Teachers in high-implementation schools were far more likely to offer students multiple pathways to learn the same material (lectures, group projects, independent work, online learning, etc.), with more than half of teachers reporting these options "most of the time" or "always." In contrast, less than one-fifth of teachers in low-implementation schools reported offering such choices consistently.

When it came to personalized supports, nearly 90% of teachers in high-implementation schools reported that all students receive individualized supports "most of the time" or "always," regardless of performance level. Moderate- and low-implementation schools showed far less consistency, with many reporting that supports occurred only "occasionally."

Similarly, teachers in high-implementation schools were much more likely to ensure that students received timely supports to make progress—with almost three-quarters of teachers saying this happened "most of the time" or "always." In moderate- and low-implementation schools, fewer than half reported consistently providing such timely supports.

Facilitating Deeper Learning, Varied Pacing, Personalized Pathways

We now turn to other core elements of a student-centered, mastery-based system: deeper learning, personalized pathways, and varied pacing. In CRS MBL, "students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing," allowing instruction to be personalized in both content and method based on students' needs, interests, and progress toward mastery.

Deeper Learning

Teachers made steady progress in designing learning experiences that more frequently allowed students to create and apply their knowledge, with 54% reporting these learning activities occur "most of the time" or "always"(Figure 30). Notably, the most significant leap occurred in Year 4, when 48% of teachers reported that students were engaging in learning activities that they could connect to real-world contexts outside the classroom. We asked teachers to report on two distinct aspects of deeper learning: *where* the learning happens and the extent to which it is connected to real-world contexts. However, far fewer indicated opportunities for students to participate in course activities outside of the school building during the day (e.g., civic and service learning).

Figure 30. Educator applied learning practices: Changes in "most of the time" or "always"
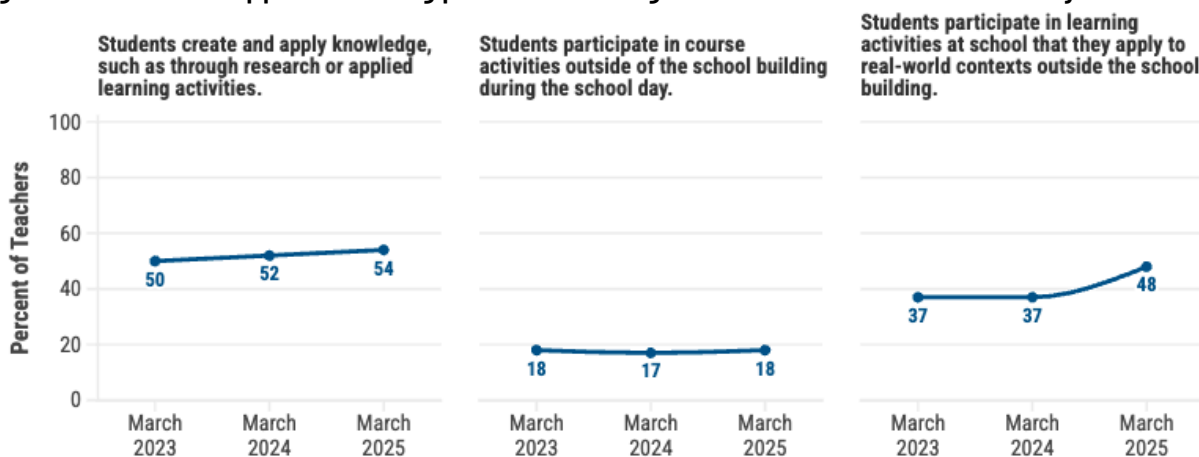
Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025

By contrast, **there was a statistically significant increase in opportunities for students to apply school-based learning to real-world contexts outside the school** [e.g., project-based learning; $F(2, 1206) = 5.83$, $p < .01$, $f = .10$]. Mean scores rose from 3.03 in Year 3 to 3.33 in Year 4, with significant differences between Years 2 and 4 ($p < .05$) and between Years 3 and 4 ($p < .01$). Although the effect size was small, this suggests a modest but meaningful expansion of opportunities for real-world application of learning over time. These results confirm the descriptive patterns described above.

Further, as shown in Appendix A Table A7, educators' reports of applied and real-world learning opportunities over time were mixed. Reports of students creating and applying knowledge through research or applied learning activities showed little change across years, with no statistically significant differences. Similarly, opportunities for students to participate in course activities outside of the school building during the day remained flat across Years 2–4.

Varied Pacing

A defining feature of CRS-aligned MBL is that students progress to new topics once they have demonstrated mastery of a learning outcome (Sutherland, Strunk, Nagel, & Kilbride, 2022). Varied pacing practices showed growth, but their pervasiveness was mixed. When asked how frequently students who have demonstrated mastery of a learning outcome move on to other topics sooner than students who have not yet demonstrated learning, about a third of Cohort 1 teachers responded "true, most of the time" or "always" (Figure 31). The percentage of teachers indicating that students who had demonstrated mastery could move on to new topics increased modestly across years (Mean = 2.66 to 2.90), with a statistically significant but negligible effect size [$F_{(2, 1211)}$ = 3.49, p = .03, f = .08]. This suggests that while some growth occurred, the practice of allowing students to advance early remains limited.

In contrast, more than 50% of teachers reported that students who have demonstrated mastery of a learning outcome have opportunities to go deeper and exceed the minimum required level of performance. Mean scores rose from 3.07 in Year 2 to 3.43 in Year 4, a statistically significant improvement with a small-to-medium effect [$F_{(2, 1211)}$ = 8.37, p < .01]. Pairwise comparisons confirmed significant gains between Years 2 and 4 (p < .01) and Years 3 and 4 (p < .05).

Figure 31. Educator varied pacing practices: Changes in "most of the time" or "always"
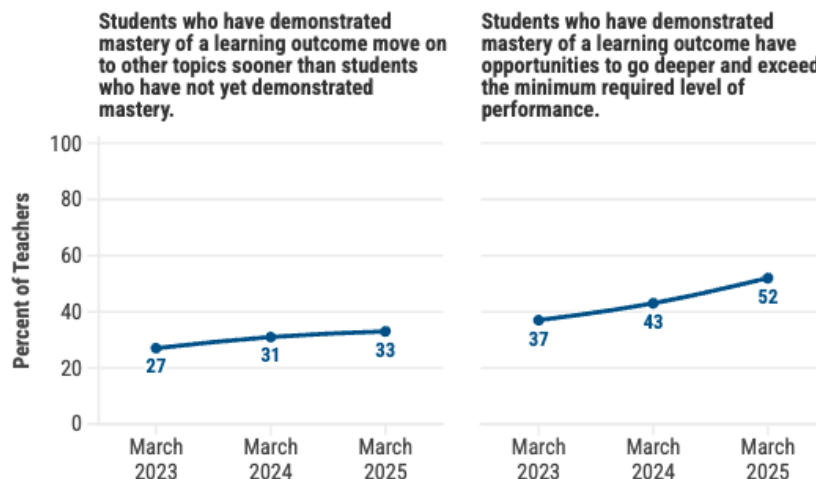
Source: MBLC Teacher surveys 2023-2025

Student perceptions substantiate these trends. About 47% of students reported that most of their classmates are "sometimes" working on different things during the same class period. Additionally, just over a third (35%) indicated they can take more time to learn something without being penalized. Together, these findings suggest that while varied pacing is emerging, its day-to-day implementation remains uneven.

Personalized Pathways

Teacher reports indicate that students rarely engage in applied learning experiences that count toward school credit but take place outside of school (see Figure 32). This pattern remained consistent across Cohort 1 from Years 2 through 4, suggesting limited progress in expanding learning beyond the classroom. These findings were not universal. **High-implementation schools were much more likely to provide applied learning opportunities for credit outside the school building** (such as service learning, internships, or independent projects). Nearly half (46%) reported offering these experiences "most of the time" or "always."

Figure 32. Educator out-of-school applied learning for credit practices: Changes over time
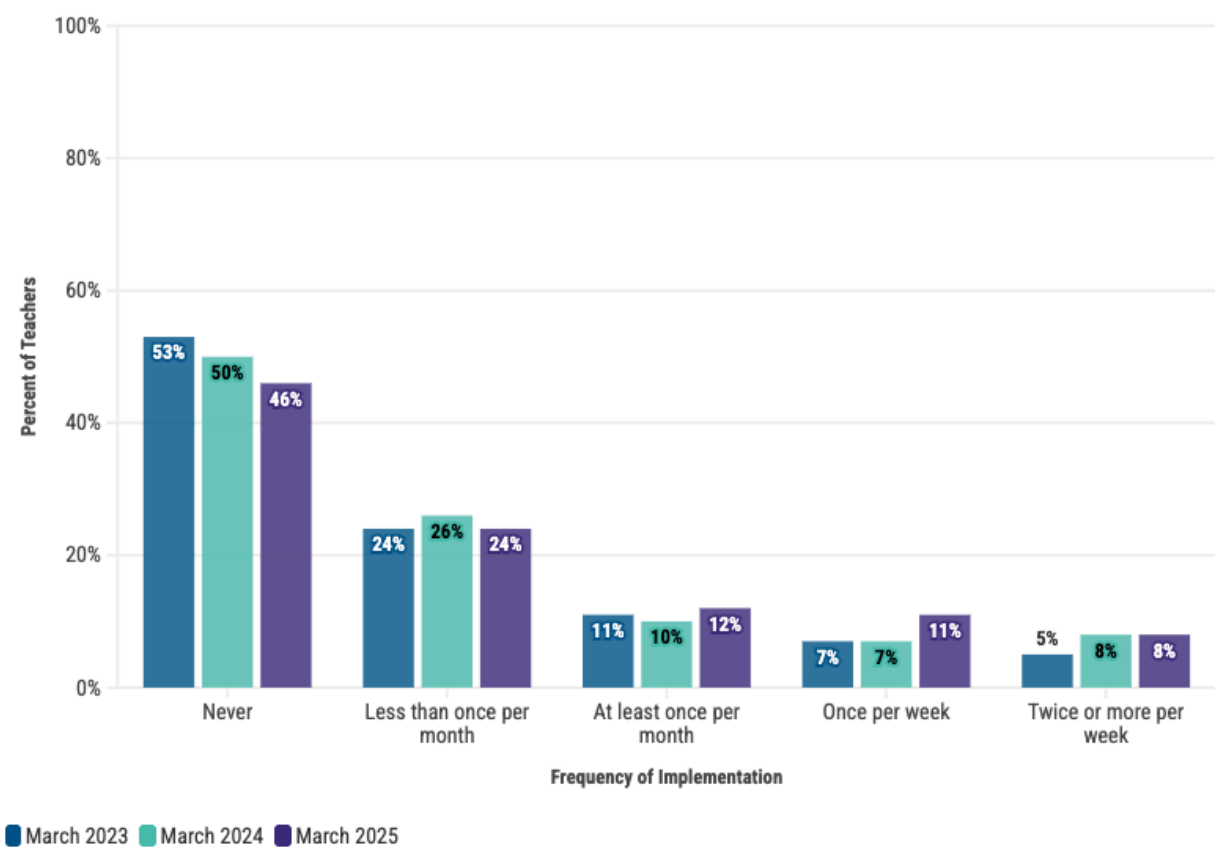
Source: MBLC Teacher Surveys 2023-2025

Core Benefits of MBLC: Emerging, Not Yet Fully Realized

Next, we will summarize what Cohort 1 identified as the benefits of their schools' efforts to plan, implement, and allocate resources to deepen their MBL and CRS practices. We use data collected from interviews with school leaders and teachers, surveys, and student focus groups. While earlier findings highlighted uneven implementation across schools and classrooms, the benefits described here reflect areas where educators and students saw tangible progress and positive outcomes more broadly. We categorized these reported benefits into more than two dozen themes, capturing a wide range of experiences and perceived value. They include:

- Increased student engagement, ownership of learning, and interest, especially among students who traditionally struggle in other settings.
- An improved school climate and stronger teacher-student relationships contributed to a greater sense of belonging and stress reduction.
- More inclusive classrooms, benefiting multilingual learners, neurodivergent students, and others with diverse learning needs.
- Clearer learning goals and grading practices enable students to understand expectations better and track their progress.
- Energized teachers, greater collaboration, and connection to a larger, values-driven movement.
- Expanded access to real-world learning opportunities, including internships, independent study, and culturally relevant experiences.
- A safe space for learning through feedback, revision, and flexible pacing, encouraging persistence and reducing failure-based grading.
- Strengthened student voice, leadership, and agency, with some students helping shift family mindsets about education.
- School-level systems changes, including more coherent expectations, staffing innovations, and increased student attendance and credit accumulation.

We describe the most compelling of these themes below, including those that reinforce our understanding from previous evaluations and those that provide new insights into schools' shifts toward deeper MBL and CRSE.

Student Engagement

Similar to previous years, students and educators reported stronger student engagement as a result of their schools' shift toward deeper MBL and CRSE. **A majority of school leaders (69%) indicated that students have become more engaged in their learning. Nearly four out of ten teachers reported that their students were more engaged as a result of their schools' efforts to shift toward more MBL and CRSE.** Some educators highlighted authentic learning applications that allow for student choice as a key driver of stronger student engagement, as evidenced by "new

assessments that are authentic have helped engagement," for example. As one science teacher in a school further along in their implementation journey explained,

"Our school has fully implemented MBL and is in the ongoing process of implementation of CRSE (though there is inherent cultural responsiveness in students leading and directing their own learning, and engaging families and home cultures throughout the process. Having students in small advisories all day, evaluating students through exhibitions and not tests or grades, and supporting the student's individual design of their learning plan all have huge impacts on the level of student engagement."

- High School Teacher

One middle school student, reflecting on their experiences, made an insightful comparison between "traditional" approaches to learning and mastery-based learning:

"In traditional school, it's like you're more memorizing...Whereas in this, instead of just memorizing from like a sheet, you're... building something, and you're learning along the way, but you're not just memorizing what you've already been told...And so it's like, you're kind of helping yourself learn about more interesting and bigger topics that'll help you."

- Middle School Student, Vocational/Career and Technical

Table 14 features selected survey items that measure how school leaders and teachers observed changes in the quality of learning, assessment, and student engagement. Across the cohort, more than 50% of school leaders reported that learning and assessment have become more engaging, authentic, and culturally responsive for students as a result of their schools' efforts to improve practices. Similarly, more than 45% of teachers perceived that learning and assessment had become more engaging and authentic; however, fewer teachers (38%) perceived changes in the cultural responsiveness of learning and assessment.

Table 14. Perceived benefits to learning: School leader and teacher survey responses

As a result of my school's work to shift toward deeper MBL and CRSE...	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	Admin	Teach	Admin	Teach	Admin	Teach	Admin	Teach	Admin	Teach
...learning and assessment have become more engaging.	8%	8%	3%	9%	11%	35%	61%	34%	16%	13%
...learning and assessment have become more authentic.	8%	7%	2%	10%	13%	35%	58%	35%	19%	14%
...learning and assessment have become more culturally responsive for students.	10%	7%	6%	9%	27%	45%	40%	28%	16%	10%

Source: MBLC Administrator and Teacher Cohort 1 Surveys 2025
Note. Administrator N = 62 and Teacher N = 297 for engaging and authentic learning and assessment, and N=296 for culturally responsive learning and assessment, and N=295 for student engagement.

Findings on student engagement highlight one of the most visible benefits of CRS MBL: when learning is made more authentic, relational, and responsive, students are more motivated to participate and take ownership of their education. This connection between engagement and deeper learning provides a natural entry point into the three pillars of culturally responsive-sustaining education: (1) academic success, (2) cultural competence, and (3) critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The following sections examine how Cohort 1 schools advanced each of these pillars, beginning with academic success as reflected in students' motivation and ownership of learning.

Academic Success: Student Motivation and Ownership of Learning

Each year, a small proportion of Washington's students disengage from school (Yoshizumi, Yohalem, & Cooley, 2020), citing among their reasons the absence of positive adult relationships, negative school climate, and academic challenges (Crumé, Martinez, Yohalem, & Yoshizumi, 2020). That is why it is especially meaningful when students who initially expressed a low desire for and interest in school, after transitioning from a traditional schooling experience to a student-centered, mastery-based learning approach, now report enjoying learning and looking forward to coming to school. Such was the case for one Cohort 1 high school student captured this experience:

"I wasn't motivated so I didn't go. If I was there, I would go to class, but then I wouldn't really do anything. Some of the teachers, in my opinion, made me feel like…you can't, you can't do it. You can't figure it out. But I had [two] teachers there … I felt like they knew that I could do more than what they thought. I am smarter than I thought I was. You know, I can actually do work instead of just like, [sitting here]. And like, here [referencing the school they transferred to] I get all my stuff. I'm finally, you know, coming to school every day, making sure I'm on time, ahead of my classes, you know, pulling my group's work together."

- High School Student, Alternative School

This student's experience was not isolated. Other students in the cohort reported a sense of renewed motivation once they were exposed to school and teaching practices that provided the structure and encouragement to own their learning. Another student described it this way,

"So yeah, I think this school just helped me a lot and made [me] more independent and just going with my work, because I had a lot of trouble just getting assignments done and just all the other stuff in [my previous school]."

- Cohort 1 High School Student, Alternative School

Educators also observed shifts in students' ownership of learning. Table 15 shows that 65% of school leaders and 43% of teachers agree that students in their schools have taken greater

ownership of their learning because of their schools' shift toward deeper MBL and CRSE. Reflecting on their experience, a middle school science teacher remarked, "Most students seem to enjoy choosing their own topics within a certain subject matter and generating their own questions to answer a scientific question. They have also enjoyed choosing their own form of summative assessment after researching and learning about their topic."

Table 15. Perceived benefits to student agency: School leader and teacher survey responses

As a result of my school's work to shift toward deeper MBL and CRSE...	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	Admin	Teach	Admin	Teach	Admin	Teach	Admin	Teach	Admin	Teach
...students have taken greater ownership of their learning.	8%	9%	5%	13%	23%	36%	47%	31%	18%	12%

Source: MBLC Administrator and Teacher Cohort 1 Surveys 2025; Administrator N = 62 and Teacher N = 295

Cultural Competence: Welcoming and Affirming School Environments

We also explored the MBLC schools' ability to foster a sense of safety and belonging among students as a core benefit and indicator of the pervasiveness of culturally responsive and sustaining practices. Welcoming and affirming environments are characterized by a "collective responsibility to learn about student cultures and communities, strong relationships with students and families, the integration of social-emotional learning, and the use of materials that represent and affirm student identities" (NSYED, nd). The strongest transformations in practice are often undergirded by sustained district- and school-wide commitments to ensuring every learner feels seen, heard, and valued through building relational trust (Bryk, Bender-Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). Interview and open-ended survey response data from Cohort 1 students, educators, and school leaders present a nuanced picture of how these elements are taking root across schools.

We found evidence of intentional school-wide and classroom-based relationship-building and practices that affirm students' identities and voices. Multiple students, across geographies and school types, shared positive interactions with teachers that exemplified the quality and impact of an adult's care, acceptance, and protection on their school experience. For instance, a student shared the following personal account of such an experience.

"As a transgender student, I actually came here because of how traditional schools treated me. And it's sad, but I've never once been called a slur here, which, unfortunately, is something you really have to appreciate. What's meant a lot is having teachers stand up for me as a person. I had one situation during an interview where someone said, 'Why do you sound like that? Are you one of those freaks?' and the teacher immediately stepped in and asked if I wanted them to handle it. Feeling safe enough that my teachers will stand up for me really matters. Even when other students say something inappropriate in class, the response is immediate, there's a conversation, and it's made clear: you don't say that, you respect your classmates. That's not something I experienced in larger schools,

where it felt like I couldn't tell anyone because there were just too many people and nothing would be done. Here, the teachers really care."

- High School Student, Alternative School

A student from a vocational/career and technical school located in a rural Washington community, reflecting on their impression of school culture, shared the following:

"I do feel like the school is very welcoming as a whole to like what your heritage is and stuff like that, like no one really cares that much about it, like they're not going to discriminate [against] you for anything like that. There's like zero discrimination in the school, besides for like drama."

- High School Student, Vocational/Career and Technical School

Foundational to these experiences were educators who prioritized getting to know students through daily, meaningful interactions. One high school teacher explained the importance of the interpersonal work that he and his colleagues accomplish each day with their students:

"We have a wellness class where teachers are really on the ground with students, playing basketball with them for the entire period. That gives us opportunities to learn about our students in ways that don't happen in a traditional classroom setting. Twice a week, I'm out there with them, getting to know their day-to-day lives and their cultural and lived experiences, things I couldn't learn just from students raising their hands at desks. These out-of-class experiences help us build real knowledge of who our students are and what they're interested in. We're deeply engaged with them throughout the day, playing games, doing activities, while still maintaining clear boundaries. But this kind of engagement really helps us teach in ways that make sense to students, because we know where they're coming from culturally and can connect with them through what matters to them."

- High School Teacher, Alternative School

In the student survey, we asked all Cohort 1 students to rate their school experiences based on safety, as students' sense of safety is an indicator of the extent to which a school's environment is welcoming and affirming. As shown in Table 16, across all racial and ethnic groups, most students reported feeling that their schools are safe places, though the strength of agreement varied. Between 38–56% of students across groups selected "Agree" or "Strongly Agree," while about a third chose "Neither Agree nor Disagree.

White or Caucasian (56%), Multiracial (55%), and Asian (56%) students were slightly more likely to agree that their schools are safe. Middle Eastern students stood out, with fewer than half (39%) agreeing their schools are safe, and the highest share reporting "Strongly Disagree" (17%). Black or African-American, Hispanic or Latino, and Native American/American Indiana/Alaska Native students, and students of other races reported agreement rates in the mid-40% range.

Table 16. Ratings of school safety, by students' self-reported racial and ethnic identity

	N	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Asian	376	8%	7%	29%	42%	14%
Black or African-American	299	10%	7%	35%	37%	12%
Hispanic or Latino	956	6%	8%	34%	38%	14%
Middle Eastern	65	17%	9%	35%	28%	11%
Multiracial students	214	9%	8%	28%	39%	16%
Native American, American Indian, Alaska Native	470	8%	7%	39%	30%	15%
Students of other races	344	7%	9%	36%	36%	12%
White or Caucasian	2334	6%	7%	32%	40%	16%

Note. Students were encouraged to select all racial/ethnic groups to which they belonged. Therefore, it is possible that some students appear in multiple groups. Results are not reported for groups with fewer than 10 respondents to protect student confidentiality and ensure reliability of findings.

As shown in Table 17, students who speak another language at home and English Language Learners (ELLs) both reported generally positive perceptions of school safety. Among students who speak another language at home, 56% agreed or strongly agreed their school is safe, while 52% of ELLs reported the same. Roughly one-third of students in both groups chose "Neither Agree nor Disagree," suggesting that while many feel safe, a sizable portion remain neutral about their school's safety.

Table 17. Ratings of school safety, by students' self-reported and ELL status

	N	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Students who speak another language at home	830	6%	8%	30%	40%	16%
English Language Learners	220	3%	8%	37%	37%	15%

Note. It is possible that some students appear in both groups.

Finally, most students who identified as male and female reported feeling their schools are safe, with 57% of males and 53% of females selecting "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" (Table 18). Non-binary students expressed less certainty: only 48% agreed their school is safe, and they were more likely than other groups to report "Strongly Disagree" (14%). These results suggest that while safety

perceptions are generally positive among male and female students, non-binary students experience school safety less positively overall.

Table 18. Ratings of school safety, by students' self-reported gender

	N	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Male	2051	7%	7%	30%	40%	17%
Female	1919	4%	8%	34%	40%	13%
Non-binary	107	14%	8%	30%	28%	20%

Cultural Competence: Student Representation in Instructional Materials

In the instructional domain, over time, we have found that often educators begin their shift toward more CRSE in classroom practices by focusing on diverse representation in instructional materials. Some educators described intentional use of diverse texts and representative materials. One veteran teacher[14] explained,

"The texts are really good for that [CRSE]. The texts are very representative to many different types of learners. Within any unit, every single student is going to identify [with] and feel seen with at least a couple of the things that we read."

- Middle School Teacher, Comprehensive School

Another mid-to-late-career teacher[15] at the high school level enthusiastically shared during our school visit, *"I love being on the CRSE journey because it allows me to open my curriculum and include stories and content that are important but might not be part of a traditional curriculum."* One school's library prominently displayed books by Black and Indigenous authors. Furthermore, the walls of the school's common areas and classrooms clearly reflected Washington's dedication to addressing past harms caused by public education systems to Tribal communities. Posters, displays, and artwork featured educational materials honoring Indigenous histories, such as those found on the "Since Time Immemorial" Tribal Sovereignty website[16].

When reflecting on CRSE implementation in their classroom, one middle school teacher shared, *"Students have commented when I had different posters up portraying different ethnic scientists. I feel like I haven't been successful implementing CRSE into the given curriculum."* As we have noted, it

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[14] Reported having more than 20 years of teaching experience (Teacher Interview, 2025).
[15] Reported having five or more years of teaching experience (Teacher Survey, 2025).
[16] https://ospi.k12.wa.us/student-success/resources-subject-area/john-mccoy-lulilas-time-immemorial-tribal-sovereignty-washington-state

is not uncommon for educators' first step towards deeper culturally responsive instruction to resemble this middle school teacher's approach.

A handful of examples were shared and observed of slightly more advanced practices that fostered cultural competence. For example, teachers used reading materials that either explicitly addressed racism to create opportunities for conversations with students about cultural awareness, anti-racism, identity, and culture. During one of our site visits, an ELA teacher led her class in critical inquiry and discussion of poetry that reflected the author's lived experiences as a Black man in America. In one of the alternative high schools, a student provided context for how CRSE shows up in her learning experiences:

"We're not just taught the textbook perspective. We're also taught the parts of the Indigenous perspective, like one of our teachers, a history teacher [redacted], instead of just doing the base value of, oh, here's what happened, we're also taught about the Indigenous perspective. So we're taught a lot of different perspectives of culture, not just Indigenous. We're taught parts of like Black culture, all different ethnicities and groups. So we see a lot of different perspectives, and we're very respectful of that."

- High School Student, Alternative High School

Taken together, these growth and impact indicators are promising. However, we took away from our conversation with state leaders a sense of their deep desire and commitment to helping districts and schools make larger leaps in culturally responsive and sustaining practices. One of the state leaders shared mixed observations regarding schools' progress in shaping more culturally responsive and sustaining environments across the MBLC network. While they acknowledged encouraging signs, such as increased awareness, professional development, and documentation that reflect CRSE principles, they also noted that meaningful cultural shifts were not consistently evident across all MBLC schools. In some classrooms, they observed promising movement toward greater equity and student agency. However, in others, they continued to see instructional practices and classroom dynamics shaped by dominant cultural norms, with marginalized students, particularly students of color, appearing disconnected or excluded.

This state leader's reflections align with, but also complicate, the teacher survey findings related to school climate and cultural responsiveness. While most educators reported that their schools became more culturally responsive and sustaining, welcoming, and safe for both marginalized and dominant student groups, the leader's on-the-ground observations suggest that these shifts may not be fully realized in every classroom. This also underscores a glaring gap in the third pillar of CRSE: critical consciousness. Few examples emerged of pedagogical approaches that explicitly engaged students in examining issues of inequity, power, and social transformation. One middle school student explained:

"I mean, typically, we don't really learn about a culture just because a student from that culture joins our school. We do learn about cultures in social studies, like they were saying, but it's not usually

based on a specific person. The teachers just don't really cover it. I don't think they often try to represent people through their cultural backgrounds; they mostly focus on teaching about different Indigenous cultures and things like that, but not based on students at our school or people they've personally encountered."

– Middle School Student, Comprehensive School

Impact: Emerging, Strengthened by High-Level Implementation

This next section addresses the research question: *To what extent did evaluation participants report that implementation of CRS MBL had a positive impact on learning conditions such as student engagement and school climate, cultural responsiveness, and safety? Did this differ across ages, student demographics, or other relevant factors?* To address this question, we examined the relationship between self-reported level of CRS MBL implementation (as described previously in this report) and key student outcomes that are precursors to academic success while controlling for student characteristics known to predict differences in outcomes. The specific outcomes we examined included cognitive engagement, teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, and habits of success.

Student Engagement

On average, students in high-level implementation schools reported better cognitive engagement and teacher-student relationships than students in low-level implementation schools. This positive association between perceived level of implementation and outcomes remained after accounting for other student and school characteristics. Implementation differences matter. Where a high level of implementation occurred, students were more likely to experience the core benefits of CRS MBL, including more meaningful relationships and increased motivation. The remainder of this section provides details for each outcome measure.

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement refers to students' intrinsic motivation, investment, and interest in learning. To measure students' cognitive engagement, we asked students about their interest and enjoyment in their schoolwork and then compiled those responses into a composite score. Further details can be found in the MBLC Cohort 1 Year 4 Technical Report.

Students in schools with a high level of implementation reported higher cognitive engagement than students in schools with a low level of implementation (Appendix D, Figure D1). This result persisted after controlling for other student and school characteristics (Appendix C, Table C1). On average, students in schools with a high level of implementation experienced levels of cognitive engagement 0.23 standard deviations greater than those in low-implementation schools. This translates to about a full scale point higher on the original scale, for example, shifting from "Disagree" toward "Neither agree nor disagree." Post-hoc tests indicated that there were also significant differences between moderate and high implementation after accounting for other student and school characteristics (chi^2(1) = 5.51; p=0.019).

> On average, students in schools with a high level of implementation experienced levels of cognitive engagement 0.23 standard deviations greater than those in low-implementation schools.

Teacher–Student Relationships

The quality of the teacher–student relationship is important for understanding student engagement. Students with at least one caring and supportive relationship with a teacher tend to have stronger academic motivation (Scales, Pekel, & Houltberg, 2022). **Students in schools with a high level of implementation reported better relationships with their teachers than students in schools with a low level of implementation** (Appendix D, Figure D2). This finding persisted even after controlling for other student and school variables (Appendix C, Table C1).

> Level of implementation might have had a greater impact on teacher-student relationships than cognitive engagement.

A coefficient of 0.59 indicated that, on average, students in schools with a high level of implementation reported relationships with their teachers that were 0.59 standard deviations better than those of students in schools with a low level of implementation, after accounting for other variables. This coefficient was twice as large as the one in the cognitive engagement model. Post-hoc tests indicated that students in schools with a high level of implementation reported better relationships with their teachers than students in schools with a moderate level of implementation after accounting for other student and school characteristics (chi^2(1) = 11.05; p=0.001). We explore these findings in greater detail in the enabling conditions section.

Peer Relationships

Students in schools with a high level of implementation reported better relationships with their peers than students in schools with a low level of implementation. However, the differences were no longer significant when student and school variables were included in the model (Appendix D, Figure D3). Post-hoc tests indicated that there were no significant differences between moderate and high implementation after accounting for other student and school variables (chi^2(1) = 1.68; p=0.195).

Student Engagement for Students of Color

The relationships between perceived level of implementation, student cognitive engagement, and teacher–student relationships for students of color were consistent with the relationships found

> We found positive and statistically significant differences in cognitive engagement and teacher-student relationships between students of color in high and low levels of implementation schools; in favor of high levels of implementation

for the full analytic sample. There were positive and statistically significant differences in cognitive engagement and teacher–student relationships between students of color in high and low levels of implementation schools (See Appendix C, Table C2). The differences in cognitive engagement and teacher–student relationships between students in high and moderate implementation level schools were also significant. However, the results for peer relationships suggest that there was no significant

difference between students in high and low levels of implementation schools, but that students in moderate levels of implementation schools reported lower peer relationships than in low levels of implementation schools and lower peer relationships than in high levels of implementation schools. These findings should be interpreted with caution, given the differences in the percentage of students of color across levels of implementation *and* the percentage of students missing data on race (e.g., 23% in moderate implementation schools).

These findings add weight to previous conclusions: higher implementation of CRS MBL is associated with stronger student cognitive engagement and improved teacher-student relationships. This reinforces the idea that equity-centered, student-centered learning environments can meaningfully improve students' academic and relational experiences. However, the lack of consistent improvements in peer relationships suggests that shifts in pedagogy and school culture may not automatically translate into stronger peer connections. It may also indicate implementation growing pains, where systems are in transition but have not yet fully established themselves.

Our analysis did not find a statistically significant association between the level of implementation and student-reported Habits of Success, such as goal-setting, collaboration, and openness to diverse ideas and cultures. This suggests that, while more extensive CRS MBL implementation may enhance engagement and teacher-student relationships, its impact on these broader personal and interpersonal skills may require more time, targeted strategies, or distinct types of support to become evident.

Enabling Conditions and Barriers to Implementation

So far, the findings in this report have coalesced into a consistent narrative of progress in many areas of CRS MBL, as well as unfortunate setbacks in others, and a fragmented implementation. The results of the Cohort's work indicate progress along the implementation continuum, especially for schools that started with a foundation in equity and culturally responsive and sustaining school-wide systems and practices. Next, we will explore the research question: *What conditions helped or impeded MBL implementation?*

Enabling Conditions

Cohort 1 schools that made significant progress in implementing CRS MBL shared several key conditions that enabled their success. These supportive elements included leadership, school and staff culture, systems, resources, and relationships, all of which helped to build the momentum, coherence, and flexibility necessary to sustain complex change.

Equity and Relationship-Centered Foundations

Schools already focused on helping students who struggled in traditional settings, such as alternative or credit-recovery models, had a strong foundation for deeper CRS MBL implementation. These schools foster a caring culture based on strong advisory systems, inclusive

practices, and student voice platforms, such as student councils. Support systems, including PBIS, inclusion models, and advisory sessions, strengthened community bonds and promoted equitable practices.

Further, schools with a higher percentage of students with disabilities tended to have higher student perceptions of CRSE-aligned teaching practices ($\beta = 0.007$, $p < .05$). While the effect size was negligible in magnitude, the direction of the relationship aligns with qualitative evidence suggesting that inclusive pedagogical structures contribute to stronger perceptions of culturally sustaining practice. For example,

- One high school student with dyslexia described how a teacher's use of color-coding strategies not only made math accessible but also empowering: "Even if my brain moves things around, I know exactly where everything is... I can do math in my head now... I even learned to do my taxes."

- Another high school student shared how their school's flexible scheduling allowed them to manage a chronic health condition while continuing their education. They described developing a class project about their disability, raising awareness, and providing resources for others. This experience not only supported their physical and emotional well-being but also enabled them to make meaningful contributions to the school community.

Such examples may provide a roadmap for enhancing culturally sustaining experiences in upper-grade levels.

Leadership and Staff Culture

Strong implementation often started with leaders who communicated a clear vision while allowing for teacher autonomy and experimentation. These leaders understood that significant instructional change requires time and encouraged teachers to take risks, experiment, and learn from their mistakes. Many also ensured that teachers had access to meaningful coaching, walkthroughs, and peer observation opportunities, thereby fostering a culture of shared growth. In smaller schools with close-knit staff, strong camaraderie and alignment made coordinated implementation easier.

Hiring the "right" people was also important. Schools emphasized the need for educators who were already student-centered, equity-minded, or open to new approaches. An educator with experience across both elementary and secondary levels reflected on how shifting student demographics and learning needs shaped their approach. He described teaching in schools where most families were Spanish-speaking and a large proportion of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. This context required intentional attention to cultural responsiveness and family engagement. Now, in a smaller middle school class of ten students—half of whom have IEPs and most of whom have SEL goals—the teacher emphasized building a learning culture that balances freedom with high expectations. While students' learning needs often look similar on paper, the teacher described how those needs and their strengths manifest in very different ways, making it essential to recognize and nurture individual "giftings." Early in the year, the class focused

heavily on SEL practices, such as kindness and community-building, before shifting toward cultivating grit and intrinsic motivation. The teacher went on to share that without grades, students need to develop a passion for learning itself, an orientation that the teacher framed as more important than mastering every academic task.

Collaboration and Enabling Structures

Implementation advanced as collaborative practices became routine, encompassing a range of activities, from co-teaching and co-planning to reviewing student data as a team. Time to engage deeply in CRS MBL work was essential; regularly scheduled collaboration supported greater consistency in school-wide implementation. Furthermore, smaller class sizes allowed for stronger relationships with students, while daily schedules and shorter grading periods (like quarters or six-week cycles) gave teachers the flexibility to personalize, revise, and experiment more rapidly. Additionally, **schools with standards-based grading already in place found that this provided a solid foundation, easing the transition to broader MBL practices.** Additionally, when schools integrated school-wide competencies and a common language for learning into their routines, students could better monitor their progress and participate actively.

MBL Tools and Systems

Effective tools helped bring the CRS MBL vision to life. Many schools adopted or adapted an LMS that supported personalized pacing, portfolio-based assessments, and real-time feedback. Popular tools included Schoology, Google Classroom, JumpRope, and Unrulr. Some schools have customized more rigid systems, such as Skyward or Empower, to better match their instructional models. Additionally, several schools created student-facing credit or competency trackers, providing transparency and empowering students to monitor their progress, hallmarks of MBL.

MBLC Coaching and Network Support

Coaching—especially from the PLP—was often seen as a key enabler. The PLP coaches provided accountability, expert knowledge, and strategic support. Other valuable partnerships involved work with the Marzano Institute, Character Strong, and visits to model schools. The MBLC community itself was a strong source of inspiration and motivation, particularly through cross-school networking and learning opportunities. Importantly, the MBLC grant not only provided funding but also created urgency and focus by holding schools accountable to their commitments.

Broader Community Support and Collective Commitment

One of the clearest benefits of MBLC participation has been the way it fostered stronger community ties and collective commitment to change. Some schools thrived thanks to a supportive local community and the persistence of dedicated teachers and leaders who showed patience and long-term focus. Even when systems were imperfect, a shared commitment to learning, equity, and innovation helped schools overcome early challenges and achieve steady progress.

Parents and community partners reinforced this work in some cases—whether through participation in community cafés that surfaced both encouragement and calls for greater staff diversity, or by contributing expertise to classrooms, such as parents leading mindfulness sessions. Students described their schools as "families," where peers and staff rallied together through difficulties, creating a culture of belonging and persistence. These dynamics, combined with authentic partnerships that tied advanced competencies to internships, small businesses, and leadership opportunities, positioned schools to make mastery-based learning real in students' lives.

Policy Levers

Senate Bill 5189 recommends provisions for a standardized, competency-based high school transcript that Washington's public schools can use either as part of a traditional transcript or as an alternative. Although this infrastructure was not yet in place to support current MBLC participants, educators expressed optimism about its future usefulness. One teacher shared the challenge of assisting a 12th-grader whose mastery-based transcript was not easily understood by her new school, resulting in a blank transcript and a significant administrative burden to resolve. This incident underscored the urgent need for a standardized method to document and communicate student competencies. As this leader pointed out, "That [process] should be easier."

Barriers to Implementation

Across Cohort 1 schools, several common challenges emerged that hindered deeper and more consistent implementation of CRS MBL. These obstacles included structural, cultural, and systemic issues, highlighting the complexity of transitioning from traditional models to a more student-centered, equity-focused approach. We have summarized these challenges below.

Time, Capacity, and Staffing Constraints

One of the most common barriers was the lack of dedicated time and space in the schedule for educators to engage in meaningful planning and collaboration. Teachers often found it challenging to incorporate CRS MBL work into their already busy schedules, with limited PLC time, especially across departments, and inconsistent opportunities for co-planning. One teacher explained, "We would need ongoing hours of PLC time in order to have any hope of implementing grading practices that could be used with any level of fidelity or consistency within our department. I don't see how or when that could happen, so trying to use MBL will never really be effectively accomplished in our school."

Some educators, particularly in smaller schools, were stretched thin, juggling multiple roles or functioning as "single" teachers responsible for several grade levels or subjects. The challenge of personalizing learning for large class sizes also remained a significant concern. Teachers cite the volume of personalized preps as a limiting factor with large class sizes. Staff turnover also made implementation more challenging, as schools frequently lost key champions of the work or team

members who had the vision and expertise to lead. In some cases, initiatives stalled when strong leaders or passionate teachers left, raising questions about sustainability.

Cultural and Mindset Barriers

Switching to CRS MBL requires more than just structural adjustments; it demands deep mindset shifts among both educators, students, and families. Teachers observed that staff buy-in was inconsistent, with some colleagues holding onto traditional grading and instructional methods. This inconsistency caused frustration and confusion for both staff and students. Students also faced adjustment challenges. Many were accustomed to compliance-based systems and struggled with the increased autonomy and depth required by CRS MBL. Some individuals required stronger self-regulation skills to succeed without strict structures, and issues such as chronic absenteeism, procrastination, or disengagement hindered their progress. We also found this in the student agency evidence, which suggests that better scaffolds and opportunities to strengthen habits of success or essential human skills are needed to ensure students are successfully owning their learning.

Some teachers and leaders shared that families often struggle to grasp mastery-based learning because it departs from familiar systems of grades and credits. Parents understand an "A in social studies" but not broad competencies, project-based work, or "self-actualization" goals. Schools are working to improve communication by reporting progress in more traditional, understandable ways while holding to mastery principles.

Educators also noted that CRSE work, especially, requires vulnerability, self-reflection, and cultural humility—skills not all staff felt confident practicing. A lack of staff diversity and inclusive curricular materials further limited schools' ability to engage all students. In some communities, fears of political backlash against equity efforts led to hesitancy in fully embracing CRSE.

Leadership and System Alignment

Implementation progress often depended on clear leadership and an aligned vision. Yet some schools lacked a building-wide strategy or mandate for rollout. Others faced conflicting messages from district leaders or limited systemic support, making it difficult to build momentum. One teacher commented, "The lack of PLC and district-wide direction has limited the implementation process."

Competing Initiatives and Expectations

Competing initiatives and misalignment between school grading policies, district expectations, and systems like state reporting (CEDARS) or NCAA eligibility requirements also created confusion. Some educators expressed frustration over mixed messages or unclear expectations around grading, especially when navigating the tension between standards-based and competency-based models.

Resources and Structural Barriers

Many schools faced challenges in organizing project-based or real-world learning activities. School leaders identified issues in adjusting schedules to accommodate expeditions, flexible periods, or performance assessments. A lack of funds for materials, transportation, or planning also limited hands-on learning opportunities. Furthermore, some content areas, such as the arts or more advanced subjects, had fewer customized resources, making it harder to implement MBL and CRSE strategies effectively. "I have asked on several occasions the MBLC staff for resources related to MBLC and the Arts. It doesn't seem to be a priority with the organization." Teachers in online or alternative settings often lacked clear guidance on how to adapt the core concepts of CRS MBL to their specific environments.

Discussion

In this Cohort 1 evaluation, we described CRS MBL implementation in a way that we hope captures high-level themes while honoring the nuances that often reflect variations by local context and conditions. We examined variation in how schools engaged with CRSE and MBL over time and the extent to which they implemented CRSE and MBL with "integrity, not fidelity" (Gagnon, 2023). This approach contrasts with rigid fidelity checklists, emphasizing that authentic, sustainable implementation requires flexibility in methods while preserving the essential intent and outcomes of the model.

To enable comparative analyses, we used self-reported data from school leaders, teachers, and students to categorize schools into *low*, *moderate*, or *high* levels of implementation. These categories were intended as descriptive indicators of relative adoption within the cohort—not as fidelity scores. This approach allowed us to explore patterns in implementation and related outcomes while avoiding the limitations of one-size-fits-all benchmarks that may not reflect the diverse ways CRSE and MBL can take shape across Washington's schools. It also aligns with the equity principles at the core of CRSE and MBL, which require responsiveness to local histories, assets, and needs—factors that cannot be meaningfully captured by standardized scoring alone. Through this descriptive study, we were able to:

- Identify multiple, context-specific pathways schools took toward shared goals.
- Observe shifts in adoption patterns as schools navigate leadership changes and policy environments.
- Better understand how variation in approach influenced student and educator experiences.

The evaluation found that, by the end of Year 4, Cohort 1 schools demonstrated progress in CRS MBL implementation, although it was uneven and fragmented across schools. Educators reported increased preparedness, deeper engagement with student-centered assessments, and a growing alignment of instructional practices with CRS MBL principles. At the same time, challenges such as

inconsistent application, limited pacing flexibility, and external policy and funding pressures highlight that this work is still in its early stages.

Schools that reached a high level of implementation in Year 4 tended to begin their MBLC participation with stronger initial commitments to equity and CRSE than moderate and low implementation schools. These schools also had stronger and more unified support from their teaching staff for both CRSE and MBL implementation. Additionally, **the level of implementation emerged as a key differentiating factor for shifts in educator practice, student cognitive engagement, and the quality of student-teacher relationships.** Where stronger implementation occurred, educators were more likely to demonstrate practices consistent with culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning, and students were more likely to experience the core benefits of CRS MBL, including more meaningful relationships and increased motivation. We were also encouraged to find that **the relationship between implementation level and engagement and relationships held true for students of color, suggesting that students benefit from work in schools that implement CRS MBL at a high level, irrespective of their background.**

These findings align with recent scholarship that advocates for the integration of culturally responsive-sustaining education and student engagement as mutually reinforcing fields of practice (Stein, Lamm, Terriquez, & Rivera, 2025). This work highlights how CRSE practices align with the psychological needs identified in engagement research—such as belonging, autonomy, and relevance—suggesting that equity-centered approaches are not only culturally affirming but also foundational to motivation. Taken together, both the MBLC evidence and this broader research point to the same conclusion: high implementation of CRS MBL contributes to the relational and motivational conditions where engagement can flourish, particularly for students of color and those historically underserved in traditional systems.

This study also found that while many students described affirming, identity-conscious instruction, others reported exclusion or limited cultural representation. However, spaces designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities may offer a promising roadmap for expanding CRSE, particularly in upper-grade levels. For example, Shakman et al. (2018) found that students with IEPs were significantly more likely than their peers to report higher levels of exposure to proficiency-based education (PBE). The authors suggested this may be because core elements of PBE, such as flexible assessment and varied instructional approaches, are often embedded in the accommodations provided through students' IEPs.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a research-based framework that supports diverse learning approaches and aligns closely with CRSE by promoting access, relevance, and agency for all students (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Likewise, Disability Studies in Education emphasizes affirming the cultural identities of students with disabilities, particularly at the intersections of race, language, and ability (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). Future research should examine how CRSE, MBL, UDL, and DSE frameworks mutually and collectively guide educational structures and practices that honor students' histories and multiple

identities as learning assets. Further research must also be conducted to explore the impact of CRSE on students' intersecting identities. Data collected in the current study did not support this level of analysis.

In the science of implementation, "Full implementation is the result of the work of multiple implementation drivers over an extended period of time. Early implementation is frequently marked by awkwardness, inconsistency, and uneven use of the innovation" (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasen, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005, p. 24). This framing is important to bear in mind, but it is also a cause for urgency, as the need to deliver on the promise of systems transformation grows. On the one hand, the findings in this report should be seen as progress toward key milestones along the implementation continuum in transforming teaching and learning systems rather than an endpoint. School transformation, particularly when grounded in equity, is complex, nonlinear, and highly contextual (Fullan, 2007; Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2010). On the other hand, we must leverage our understanding of what has helped propel certain schools to deeper school-wide coherence and implementation to develop policies and pathways that aid other schools in accelerating their school-wide implementation. As Cohort 1 transitions beyond its initial funding phase, sustaining momentum, deepening practice, and ensuring equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities should remain critical priorities for these schools and Washington.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

Deep and sustained change often requires five to ten years to reach maturity (Fullan, 2007; Bryk et al., 2010). However, the reality is that many transformation arcs are abandoned before their intended benefits are realized. As one educator reflected, even well-intentioned district-level changes "hit hard" one year and then disappear the next, leaving schools to decide on their own which principles to carry forward. This evaluation has identified several promising approaches to advance schools' and districts' progress along the implementation continuum. We offer the following recommendations based on these insights.

1. Continue investing in culturally responsive and sustaining education capacity-building and sustained implementation. We found substantial evidence through this evaluation that suggests students, regardless of their background, demonstrate increased engagement when exposed to diverse perspectives and inclusive learning environments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Hammond, 2015). Therefore, despite the current sociopolitical climate (or perhaps because of it), we recommend that Washington continue its investments in culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning. Explore, with input from districts and schools, the unique and shared implementation barriers they encounter, including those identified in this evaluation, such as the need for more discipline-specific professional learning, resources, and implementation coaching in CRSE.

2. Ensure all students have consistent access to just-in-time personalized support within the school day. The evaluation found that few schools offered structured supports such as enrichment

periods or writing/math centers, relying instead on individual teachers' formative feedback and assistance, which is likely to vary considerably from classroom to classroom. Structured supports like "What I Need" (WIN) time, flex periods at the middle and high school levels, and tutoring centers (often provided at the postsecondary level) are critical mechanisms for translating assessment into action and ensuring that *all* students have consistent access to help to reach mastery without having to stay after school.

Student survey responses reinforce this need. When asked whether they received support from an adult outside of class time, only 21% of students said "never," and just 13% said "always," with the majority scattered across "occasionally," "often," or "most of the time." This distribution suggests that while some students can reliably access help, many experience it only intermittently, and a notable percentage report little or no support at all.

Yet schools that tried to implement flexible schedules described real barriers. One principal explained that staff resisted daily flex time, preferring to use their full class periods for reteaching and retakes. Others pointed to state seat-time requirements, attendance rules, and teacher contract limits on additional "preps" as barriers to running flex periods equitably. Without policy clarity, staff resistance is not "change fatigue." It is often a rational response to regulatory ambiguity that threatens instructional quality, scheduling coherence, or teachers' contractual and certification limits. In light of this, we offer these potential policy levers:

- Clarify and modernize state definitions of instructional time and seat-time requirements (e.g., reconciling 50-minute block rules, attendance expectations, and credit logic) so districts can pilot flex periods, advisory time, and enrichment blocks without triggering compliance violations or staffing overload.
- Provide planning grants and technical assistance to help schools redesign schedules in ways that minimize teacher burden, avoid idle time for students, and ensure equitable access to support and enrichment.
- Encourage a menu of models (e.g., WIN time, embedded tutoring centers, advisory periods) rather than a one-size-fits-all flex block, allowing schools to adapt their structures to their size, staffing, and student needs.
- Reimagine flexible learning periods as spaces for both support and extension, with structures that allow students to access timely help while enabling others to pursue deeper mastery through independent studies and project-based work.
- As educators increasingly turn to AI to aid them in meeting the personalized needs of diverse learners at scale, they will need guidance. Therefore, we recommend building on Washington's existing Human-Centered AI guidance by creating approval pathways for adaptive learning platforms and AI tools that explicitly align with CRS MBL, giving districts clarity on which tools are research-based, equity-centered, and interoperable with state systems. With technology evolving at such a rapid pace, the Department of Education has cautioned that local leaders cannot reasonably be expected to evaluate AI tools against shifting criteria for privacy, bias, transparency, and accountability independently. This

underscores the need for state-level guidelines and guardrails tailored to education, so districts have clarity and support when making adoption decisions (U.S. Department of Education, 2023), which leads us to our next key point under the broader recommendation.

- Strengthen technology equity safeguards so that adoption reinforces culturally responsive practices rather than undermining them. More specifically, state guidance should ensure that students' ways of knowing, communicating, and expressing identity—often rooted in cultural and linguistic traditions—are not erased or misrepresented by generative AI systems (Agarwal, Naaman, & Vashistha, 2025).

3. Enable comprehensive high schools to redesign schedules for student success. Expanding access to structured supports, such as flex periods and tutoring centers, depends in part on schools' ability to reorganize time within the school day. Yet many large, comprehensive high schools identified scheduling constraints as a significant barrier to implementing these kinds of personalized supports, as well as to fostering collaboration and advisory structures more broadly. Addressing scheduling challenges is, therefore, essential to making school-level supports both feasible and sustainable.

- Provide technical assistance or planning grants to help secondary schools pilot alternative schedules (e.g., block scheduling, flex days, learning labs, shorter terms like trimesters or quarters).
- Highlight successful case studies to show what schedule redesign looks like in practice.

4. Strengthen assessment systems to support mastery and authentic learning. The evaluation found that when asked to report how frequently they "show what [they] have learned by applying it (like to a project or real-world situation)" summatively, only 37% indicated they do this in their classrooms *"most of the time"* or *"always."* Just about the same percentage (34%) reported they do this *"sometimes."* Furthermore, there are real-time and staffing barriers hindering progress in assessment development in this area of practice.

Washington is not alone in facing this challenge. Across the nation, states and networks are experimenting with performance-based assessments that enable students to demonstrate mastery through application, problem-solving, and authentic tasks. New Hampshire's Performance Assessment of Competency Education pilot (2019; now PLACE) showed that when states provide common rubrics, moderation protocols, and technical assistance, performance-based assessments can serve as a credible alternative to traditional tests while supporting deeper learning. The New York Performance Standards Consortium demonstrated how schools can reliably scale performance assessments, using structured scoring, professional learning communities, and cross-school scoring calibration to build confidence in results. FullScale, along with other national organizations such as the Center for Innovation in Education and the Learning Policy Institute, has documented similar lessons: performance-based assessments improve rigor and equity when systems-level supports, including frameworks, professional learning, and policy flexibility, accompany them. We recommend the following policy and practice approaches:

- Strengthen the quality of Washington's Performance-based Pathways policy adoption and, more broadly, authentic assessments of learning by ensuring educators have the guidance and support to develop empirically valid and comparable performance-based measures of learning that are well-aligned with CRS MBL principles (e.g., meaningful and connected to students' rich funds of cultural knowledge). One approach may be to provide technical assistance to deepen practitioners' assessment literacy. Pilot funding for districts to expand authentic assessment formats across in-school and out-of-school learning experiences and to validate these assessments.
- Co-design with educators, state-level guidance and exemplars—leveraging generative AI where possible—that show how performance tasks can be implemented reliably (with clear expectations for collaboration, accountability, and rigor) and connected to academic standards and Portraits of a Graduate. This process should also include the voices of students and their families to ensure broad alignment and buy-in across diverse learning communities. Doing so will not only help lift the burden for teachers but also provide a playbook that can lead to more coherent performance assessment practices.
- Resource professional learning and coaching for teachers to build strong feedback loops (reteaching in different ways, goal-setting, and student self-assessment) into instruction so students consistently connect assessment to growth.

5. Expand school leader and teacher leadership development opportunities. Leaders play a critical role in shaping school culture, sustaining change, and navigating structural or political challenges that can stall implementation. The evaluation found that schools with deeper implementation often had leaders who were able to build coherence between vision, staff practices, and system structures. These leaders also fostered environments where equity and mastery-based learning could take root through shared decision-making, distributed leadership, and strategic use of resources. These findings underscore the need for professional learning that supports leadership development in conjunction with CRS MBL implementation.

- Invest in CRSE professional learning that assists leaders in cultivating cultural competence, navigating intrapersonal and staff resistance, and guiding staff through adaptive change.
- Invest in school leadership development focused on aligning systems (scheduling, grading, professional learning, etc.) to support whole-school transformation.
- Invest in teacher leadership development focused on driving instructional coherence with best practices in CRS MBL, championing teacher ideas and innovations, and ensuring increasing integration of student voice in instructional decisions.

6. Expand schools' access to targeted professional learning and strategic implementation planning by providing ongoing access to high-quality professional learning that is differentiated, adaptive, and designed to support schools and educators at different stages of implementation. These opportunities should span needs that include foundational knowledge to advanced instructional design, development of competency and learning progressions (which should be a school-wide effort rather than an individual teacher's responsibility), and practice refinement.

- Invest in regional communities of practice hubs, through ESDs or MBLC peer networks, to provide ongoing CRS MBL development and opportunities for collaboration that respond to each school's local context.
- Invest in school leadership development focused on aligning systems (scheduling, grading, professional learning, LMSes, etc.) to support whole-school transformation.
- Pilot modularized adaptive learning pathways that enable educators to self-assess and, based on the results, choose or be matched with professional learning resources and opportunities tailored to their role, experience level, or school's implementation stage.
- Continue or expand MBLC-type funding (mini-grants) that enable schools to hire consultants, participate in site visits, or support internal professional learning and coaching aligned with their local needs.
- Enhance existing CRSE guidance by incorporating practical lesson examples and strategies, particularly in the area of critical consciousness, where a significant gap exists. Identify self-assessment tools to aid districts and schools in monitoring their progress across the full scope of CRSE.

7. Strengthen systems of accountability and support for MBL and CRSE implementation through evaluation tools like TPEP, while pairing expectations with meaningful incentives. A veteran teacher reflected that while they enjoy learning new approaches, the successful implementation of MBL requires clear expectations and accountability. They emphasized the importance of sticking to a plan, noting that when educators opt out due to frustration, it slows progress. The teacher suggested that evaluations, such as TPEP, could be used to support and onboard teachers who are struggling, noting that without accountability, a culture of avoidance can develop. We found merit in this recommendation, as it reflects a common roadblock to school innovation. However, we also recognize that a system of compliance is not the best path for sustained change. Therefore, we recommend,

- OSPI and school districts collaborate more closely to enhance the use of TPEP, determining how best to integrate the practices they are working toward in the evaluation process to both honor and incentivize these transformational efforts.
- Use evaluation conversations to spark reflective practice and identify needed supports.
- Require administrators and evaluators to be trained in CRS MBL principles.

To encourage buy-in and shift the culture from compliance to commitment, these expectations should also be paired with incentives, such as:

- Stipends or release time for staff leading implementation efforts or mentoring peers,
- Recognition systems that highlight innovative teaching aligned to CRS MBL,
- Opportunities for leadership roles, fellowships (e.g., Impact Fellows), or showcasing work in state-led and national convenings,
- Pathways for advancement that are connected to demonstrated implementation of CRS MBL.

8. Strengthen the data infrastructure associated with district and school implementation. One of the often-overlooked successes of the MBLC's work has been the data it has amassed across SBE, schools, and partners. This growing body of evidence, spanning educator surveys, student experiences, implementation self-assessments, and coaching documentation, offers powerful insights into what drives meaningful progress in culturally responsive and sustaining, mastery-based learning. To build on this momentum, we recommend that Washington invest in a more robust and coherent data infrastructure to support local and state-level decision-making. Doing so will support future longitudinal studies of implementation progress and impact that will offer visibility into not only the sustainability of this work but also the return on the State's investment. This could include:

- Establish shared indicators and progress monitoring tools aligned with CRS MBL principles to track implementation across schools and districts.
- Provide training and tools that help school and district leaders interpret and use implementation and outcomes data to inform continuous improvement.
- Align learning management systems, grading platforms, and performance tracking tools with CRS MBL practices to support real-time, actionable data use by educators.
- Strengthen collaborations between state agencies, researchers, and schools to continue refining and learning from the data generated by MBLC and similar initiatives.
- Continue to gather and monitor shifts in student perceptions of school safety and welcoming and affirming environments by demographic group.

Conclusion

Finally, we offer a few concluding thoughts. First, systems change takes time. System transformation is a developmental process that progresses in stages, ranging from the initial adoption of the transformation model to full-scale operation, innovation, and sustainability, often requiring sustained support and adaptation over time (Fixsen et al., 2005). However, many students cannot afford short-lived investments. The MBLC Initiative represents a firm commitment from Washington's leaders and educators to test a model that holds potential for creating more equitable learning conditions, opportunities, and outcomes for learners.

Second, CRS MBL implementation is not a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to take into account local conditions driving differences in application and success. We have been careful to consider as many factors that contribute to variation in implementation and outcomes as possible. However, it is unlikely that we have captured all of the important nuances that make this work so impactful and challenging. Therefore, these findings should be taken as a provocation for increased investment in and studies of the incredible shifts toward more equitable and academically enriched learning environments that are taking place in many of Washington's MBLC schools.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Mean differences in preparedness to implement MBL over time

MBLC Year	N	Mean	SD	Tukey Post-Hoc Test of Mean Differences		
				Year 2 vs. Year 3	Year 2 vs. Year 4	Year 3 vs. Year 4
Year 2	417	2.38	0.909	Mean Diff. = 0.17	Mean Diff.= 0.57	Mean Diff. = 0.40
Year 3	492	2.55	0.863	95% CI [0.039, 0.309], p = .007	95% CI [0.417, 0.721], p < .001	95% CI [0.248, 0.542], p < .001
Year 4	308	2.95	0.799			

Source: MBLC Administrator and Teacher Cohort 1 Surveys 2024-2025
Note: Rating scale = 1: Not Prepared, 2: A little prepared, 3: Moderately prepared, 4: Very prepared

Table A2. Mean differences in preparedness to implement CRSE over time

MBLC Year	N	Mean	SD	Tukey Post-Hoc Test of Mean Differences		
				Year 2 vs. Year 3	Year 2 vs. Year 4	Year 3 vs. Year 4
Year 2	421	2.36	0.883	Mean Diff. = 0.30	Mean Diff. = 0.40	Mean Diff. = 0.10
Year 3	490	2.66	0.812	95% CI [0.1672, 0.4308], p < .001	95% CI [0.2515, 0.5505], p < .001	95% CI [-0.0431, 0.2471], p = .226
Year 4	302	2.76	0.845			

Source: MBLC Teacher Cohort 1 Survey 2024-2025
Note: Rating scale = 1: Not Prepared, 2: A little prepared, 3: Moderately prepared, 4: Very prepared

Table A3. Mean differences in competencies as the foundation for implementation over time

MBLC Year	N	Mean	SD	Tukey Post-Hoc Test of Mean Differences		
				Year 2 vs. Year 3	Year 2 vs. Year 4	Year 3 vs. Year 4
Year 2	38	3.45	0.891	Mean Diff. = 0.26	Mean Diff. = 0.22	Mean Diff. = 0.48
Year 3	44	3.18	0.946	95% CI [-0.2368, 0.7679], p = .4244	95% CI [-0.2557, 0.6943], p = 0.5194	95% CI [0.02967, 0.94], p < .05
Year 4	57	3.67	1.005			

Source: MBLC School Leader Cohort 1 Survey 2023-2025
Note. Rating scale = 1: We do not plan to organize learning around competencies, 2: We plan to shift to competencies but haven't started yet, 3: Early phase of shifting to competencies, 4: Intermediate phase of shifting to competencies, 5: Fully organizing learning around competencies.

Table A4. Mean differences in educator practices of instructional decision-making over time

Domain		Year 2			Year 3			Year 4		One-way ANOVA results w/ Tukey Post-hoc Tests					
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	F	df	p	Y2 vs. Y3	Y2 vs. Y4	Y3 vs. Y4
Who decides which topics and activities each student focuses on in class every day?	420	2.01	0.943	492	2.02	0.927	302	2.13	0.934	1.831	2	0.16	0.013 (0.98)	0.125 (0.18)	0.112 (0.23)
Who decides what schoolwork each student does outside of class (such as homework)?	420	2.79	1.537	491	2.84	1.502	301	3.05	1.468	2.866	2	0.06	0.052 (0.86)	0.262 (0.06)	0.21 (0.14)
Who decides how each student will demonstrate what the student has learned (such as via a project, test, paper, or presentation)?	421	2.21	1.042	492	2.22	1.017	301	2.41	1.044	4.012	2	<.05	0.011 (0.99)	0.2 *	0.189*
Who decides when each student will take an exam or other final assessment?	420	1.75	0.962	492	1.84	0.981	301	1.87	0.964	1.395	2	0.25	0.085 (0.39)	0.112 (0.28)	0.027 (0.92)

Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025
*Note: * Significant at .05 level*

Table A5. Mean differences in educator summative assessment practices over time

		Year 2			Year 3			Year 4		One-way ANOVA results					
Dimension	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	F	df	p	Y2 vs. Y3	Y2 vs. Y4	Y3 vs. Y4
Allow the student to demonstrate understanding using a different type of assessment.	417	2.73	1.160	491	2.81	1.168	300	2.91	1.204	1.895	2	0.15	0.076 (.59)	0.173 (0.13)	0.097 (.50)
Allow the student to retake or revise the assessment at a later date with no penalty for needing the reassessment.	416	3.96	1.219	490	4.04	1.189	300	4.14	1.129	2.103	2	0.12	0.081 (.56)	0.184 (.10)	0.103 (.46)
Allow the student to retake or revise the assessment at a later date, but reduce their grade because they didn't pass the first time	416	1.80	1.303	491	1.80	1.355	300	1.82	1.378	0.033	2	0.97	0 (0.99)	0.023 (0.97)	0.023 (0.97)
Arrange for the student to receive additional learning supports during school, after school, or during the summer.	417	2.96	1.269	490	3.35	1.238	298	3.35	1.241	13.325	2	<.01	0.39**	0.39**	-0.001 (0.99)

Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025
*Note. ** Significant at .01 level*

Table A6. Mean differences in educator assessment format practices over time

	Year 2			Year 3			Year 4			One-way ANOVA results					
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	F	df	p	Y2 vs. Y3	Y2 vs. Y4	Y3 vs. Y4
Students are assessed with traditional tests (such as multiple choice, true-false, short answer questions).	417	2.71	1.196	488	2.52	1.104	298	2.54	1.073	3.615	2	<.05	-0.192*	-0.168 (0.12)	0.024 (0.96)
Students are assessed with performance-based assessments such as complex real-world tasks or personally meaningful projects.	417	3.08	1.088	489	3.08	1.126	298	3.22	1.106	1.770	2	0.17	-0.004 (0.99)	0.137 (0.23)	0.141 (0.19)
Students can choose how they want to be assessed from multiple options (such as taking a written or verbal test, writing a paper, completing a project, or making a presentation).	417	2.13	1.012	488	2.29	1.077	298	2.41	1.098	7.386	2	<.01	0.163 (0.06)	0.286**	0.123 (0.26)

Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025
*Note.** Significant at .01 level, * Significant at .05 leve*l

Table A7. Mean differences in educator differentiated support practices over time

	Year 2			Year 3			Year 4			One-way ANOVA results					
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	F	df	p	Y2 vs. Y3	Y2 vs. Y4	Y3 vs. Y4
Students have the opportunity to choose different ways to learn the same material (such as lectures, small-group discussions, group projects, independent projects, online work, etc.)	424	2.696	1.093	489	2.87	1.089	301	2.987	1.155	7.866	2	<.01	0.174 *	0.291 **	0.12 (0.32)
All students receive personalized supports based on their individual learning needs, regardless of how well they are doing in school.	424	3.297	1.165	490	3.45	1.184	302	3.656	1.141	8.349	2	<.01	0.153 (.12)	0.359 **	0.206 *
Students receive personalized supports as needed to make timely progress.	424	3.356	1.104	489	3.50	1.090	302	3.772	1.083	12.87	2	<.01	0.144 (.12)	0.416 **	0.272 **

Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025
*Note. ** Significant at .01 level, * Significant at .05 level*

Table A8. Mean differences in educator deeper learning practices over time

Dimension	Year 2			Year 3			Year 4			One-way ANOVA results					
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	F	df	p	Y2 vs. Y3	Y2 vs. Y4	Y3 vs. Y4
Students create and apply knowledge, such as through research or applied learning activities.	419	3.47	1.109	489	3.52	1.142	300	3.623	1.092	1.698	2	0.18	0.052 (0.76)	0.155 (0.16)	0.103 (0.42)
Students participate in course activities outside of the school building during the school day.	420	2.17	1.234	487	2.17	1.219	299	2.244	1.189	0.396	2	0.67	0 (.99)	0.07 (0.73)	0.07 (.69)
Students participate in learning activities at school that they apply to real-world contexts outside the school building.	420	3.06	1.277	490	3.03	1.281	300	3.327	1.202	5.83	2	<.01	-0.02 (.95)	0.27*	.30**

Source: MBLC Teacher Survey 2025

*Note. ** Significant at .01 level, * Significant at .05 level*

Appendix B

Table B1. Year 4 comparison of teacher and student perspectives on who decides daily classroom topics and activities

	Teacher %	Student %
The teacher decides on their own	25%	46%
The teacher decides with some student input	51%	34%
The teacher and student decide together	12%	10%
The student decides with some teacher input	12%	6%
The student decides on their own	0%	4%

Sources: MBLC Cohort 1 Teacher and Student surveys 2025
Note. Teacher N =302 and Student N = 4415

Table B2. Year 4 comparison of teacher and student perceptions of who decides on work completed outside of class

	Teacher %	Student %
The teacher decides on their own	20%	32%
The teacher decides with some student input	23%	14%
The teacher and student decide together	13%	9%
The student decides with some teacher input	22%	14%
The student decides on their own	23%	31%

Sources: MBLC Cohort 1 Teacher and Student surveys 2025
Note. Teacher N =301 and Student N = 4381

Table B3. Year 4 comparison of teacher and student perceptions of who decides how students demonstrate their learning

	Teacher %	Student %
The teacher decides on their own	21%	39%
The teacher decides with some student input	38%	21%
The teacher and student decide together	24%	15%
The student decides with some teacher input	16%	10%
The student decides on their own	2%	16%

Sources: MBLC Cohort 1 Teacher and Student surveys 2025
Note. Teacher N =301 and Student N = 4364

Table B4. Year 4 comparison of teacher and student perceptions of who decides when each student takes a final assessment

	Teacher %	Student %
The teacher decides on their own	44%	48%
The teacher decides with some student input	34%	19%
The teacher and student decide together	15%	13%
The student decides with some teacher input	6%	7%
The student decides on their own	1%	14%

Sources: MBLC Cohort 1 Teacher and Student surveys 2025
Note. Teacher N =301 and Student N = 4401

Appendix C

Table C1. Regression results: Student engagement predicted by level of implementation (Reference Group = Low)

	cognitive engagement	cognitive engagement	teacher-student relationships	teacher-student relationships	peer relation-ships	peer relation-ships
Moderate	0.099	0.067	0.093	0.122	0.149	-0.003
	(.08)	(.06)	(.12)	(.14)	(.09)	(.1)
High	0.509***	**0.226****	0.761***	**0.592***	0.336***	0.138
	(.07)	(.09)	(.12)	(.17)	(.1)	(.14)
Constant	-0.092**	0.473**	-0.118**	0.515	-0.142**	0.834***
	(.04)	(.23)	(.06)	(.33)	(.07)	(.32)
Control variables	Not Included	Included	Not Included	Included	Not Included	Included
Observations (N)	4238	4238	4310	4310	4312	4312

*Note: Standard errors in parentheses. ** p<0.05 *** p<0.01". Student-level control variables include grade, race, gender, and IEP status with dummy variables for missing data. School-level control variables include school size (<50 students per grade), percent of economically disadvantaged students, percent of students who are white, and percent of students with disabilities.*

Table C2. Regression results for students of color: Student engagement predicted by level of implementation (Reference Group = Low Level of Implementation)

	cognitive engagement	cognitive engagement	teacher-student relation-ships	teacher-student relation-ships	peer relation-ships	peer relation-ships
Moderate	0.051	0.079	0.004	-0.085	0.027	-0.211***
	(.04)	(.05)	(.11)	0.09	(.09)	(.08)
High	0.560***	**0.361****	0.791***	**0.411****	0.329***	0.097
	(.07)	(.15)	(.11)	(.11)	(.1)	(.12)
Constant	-0.074**	0.534**	-0.148*	0.669**	-0.124*	0.667*
	(.03)	(.26)	(.08)	(.31)	(.07)	(.38)
Control variables	Not Included	Included	Not Included	Included	Not Included	Included
Observations (N_	1998	1998	2021	2021	2017	2017

*Note: Standard errors in parentheses. ** p<0.05 *** p<0.01". Student-level control variables include grade, race, gender, and IEP status with dummy variables for missing data. School-level control variables include school size (<50 students per grade), percent of economically disadvantaged students, percent of students who are white, and percent of students with disabilities.*
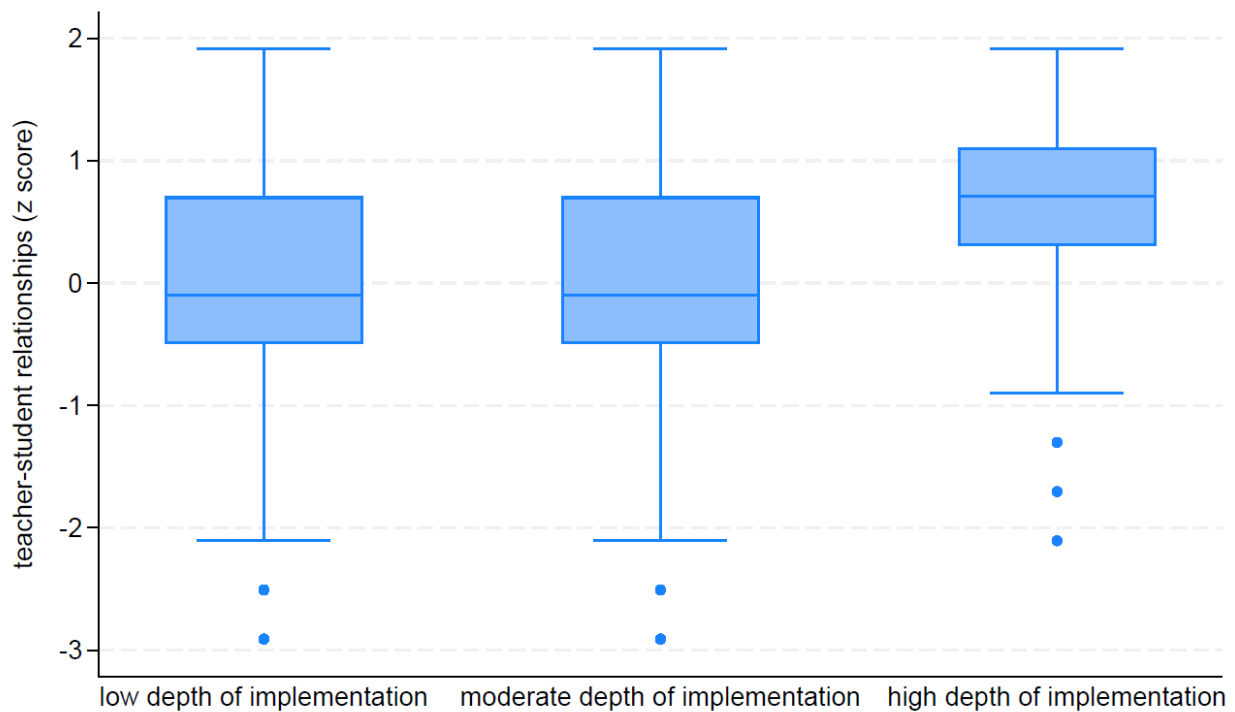
Appendix D

Figure D1. Box plot of cognitive engagement by level of implementation
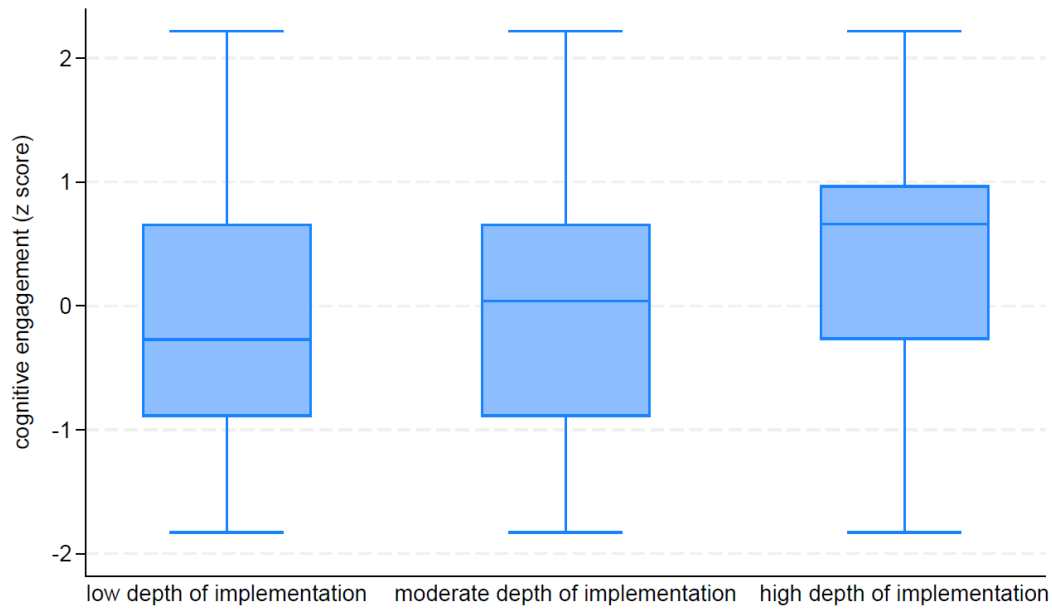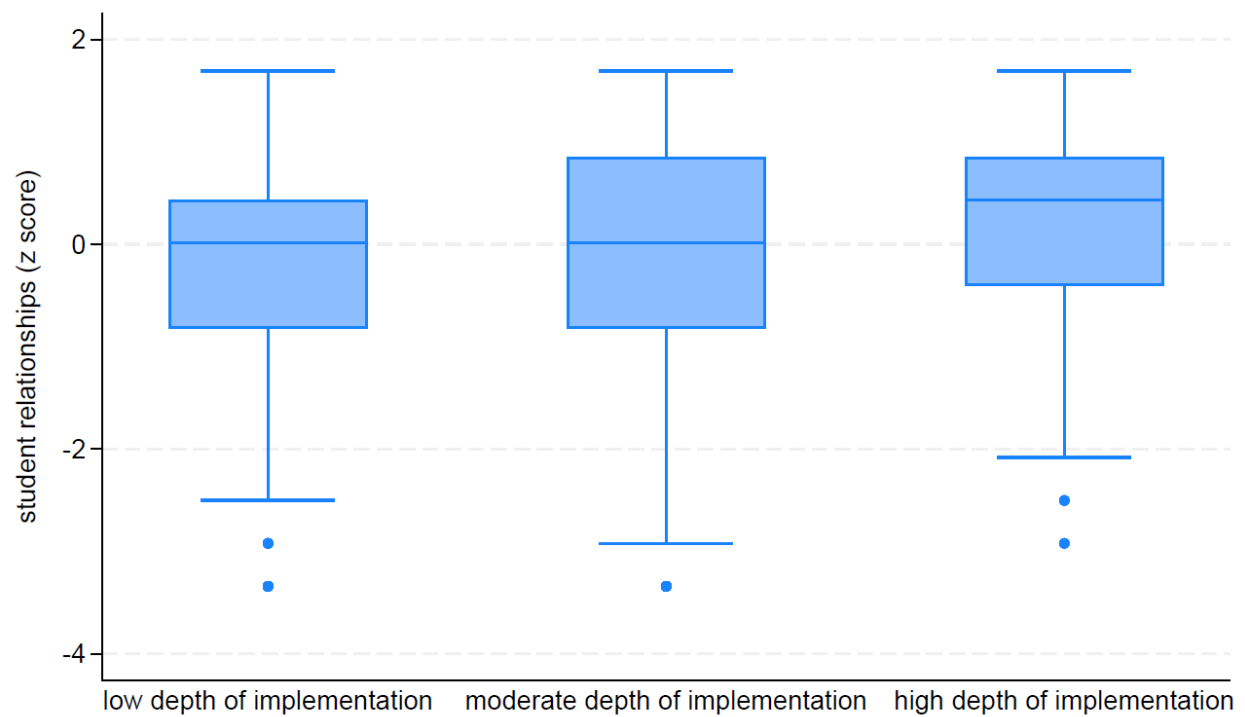

Note. The box represents the median value, 75th percentile, and 25th percentile. The horizontal lines show the range of the data.

Figure D2. Box plot of teacher–student relationships by level of implementation

Note. The box represents the median value, 75th percentile, and 25th percentile. The horizontal lines show the range of the data, with the dots representing outliers.

Figure D3. Box plot of peer relationships by level of implementation

Note. The box represents the median value, 75th percentile, and 25th percentile. The horizontal lines show the range of the data, with the dots representing outliers.