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FullScale

Washington State
Mastery-Based Learning
Collaborative

Evaluation Report: Cohort 2 Year 2

Prepared For :
Washington State Board of Education

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Acknowledgments

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- Independent Learning Center (Methow Valley School District, Twisp)
- Legacy High School (Marysville School District, Marysville)
- Lopez Island Elementary, Middle, and High School (Lopez Island School District, Lopez Island)
- Open Doors at Heights Campus (Vancouver Public Schools, Vancouver)
- Pinnacles Prep Charter School (Wenatchee)

The photo on the cover page is a student mural at Hudson's Bay High School in Vancouver, WA.

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.

This report was prepared by FullScale under contract with Washington's State Board of Education.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative (MBLC) is a demonstration project taking place in 46 schools in 26 districts across Washington State. The first cohort of 22 schools began their MBLC journey in the 2021-22 school year; the second cohort of 24 schools began in the 2023-24 school year. Schools[1] receive grant funding and personalized coaching and also participate in professional learning with the statewide network of MBLC schools to support implementation of mastery-based learning (MBL) and culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE). The initiative's overarching goal is to inform policy by helping decision-makers better understand what quality culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning looks like, how long it takes to implement, and what resources are necessary. The MBLC is led by the Washington State Board of Education (SBE), with support from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB).

FullScale (formerly the Aurora Institute) is conducting a multi-year evaluation of the initiative to identify effective policies, practices, and system changes that support culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning (CRS MBL) implementation throughout Washington's K-12 education system. This report presents evaluation activities and findings for Cohort 2 in their second year (2024-2025) of the initiative, which is focused on professional learning.

In this report, we describe the inputs and supports received by Cohort 2 schools. We then turn our attention to current implementation of CRS MBL practices across the cohort, using both quantitative and qualitative measures to paint a picture of how different schools are implementing the core components of both mastery-based learning and culturally responsive-sustaining education. After describing the range of implementation practices, we analyze what factors helped or hindered implementation. Lastly, we turn to the benefits of MBLC participation as described by school leaders and educators in the network.

Key Findings

Implementation of CRS MBL

Overall, we find significant variability in the level of implementation of CRS MBL practices across Cohort 2 schools. Approximately 25% of teacher survey respondents said they are regularly implementing CRS MBL practices, and about half said they are just beginning to do so. From an administrative perspective, 39% of school leader survey respondents say their school is already implementing MBL practices deeply, and 44% say the same about CRSE practices. This is a higher

[1] Some schools share grant funding with other schools in their district. Throughout this report we will describe the experience of schools, not grantees.

level of self-reported implementation than expected at this stage, given that schools were surveyed at the beginning of their professional learning year. To better understand what was actually occurring in schools at this early stage, we then examined implementation practices in more detail, guided by the definition of CRS MBL.

Culturally responsive-sustaining education: Belief in the value of CRSE is generally high among teachers and school leaders, and 75% of school leaders feel at least moderately prepared to lead their school in CRSE work. However, very few schools are implementing deep culturally responsive-sustaining practices. Most schools in Cohort 2 are focused on increasing visible representation of and appreciation for diverse identities in academic work, often through the support of community partnerships. Deepening cultural competence among staff is a focus area of professional learning for many schools; many teachers expressed a desire for more overt coaching and support in this area. Very few schools have yet implemented practices designed to support students in developing critical consciousness.

Student agency: Most Cohort 2 teachers still lead students' daily classroom activities. Changing this norm requires a shift in classroom management practices, clarity around student learning outcomes, and a mindset shift for teachers from "instructor" to "facilitator." It also requires students to move away from a compliance mindset to a more agentic one, which takes time and intentional opportunity curation. Some schools gave examples of ways they are developing those mindsets and practices, such as passion projects or by involving students in more school decision-making, but this was not consistent cohort-wide.

Essential competencies: Every school in Cohort 2 reported that they plan to shift to competencies, and most are already working on doing so; a few schools have been fully competency-based since before they joined the MBLC. However, very few schools are yet ensuring that students and their families can transparently track their progress towards a set of clearly communicated learning outcomes. This highlights the need to strengthen foundational practices around ensuring teacher and learner clarity on learning outcomes before tackling the complex process of competency development.

Meaningful assessment: Many Cohort 2 schools focused on this area in Year 2, working with their coaches to update and standardize grading policies and practices across their buildings or develop consistent rubrics. Many Cohort 2 schools entered the MBLC with a preexisting interest in this area of practice, often from previous initiatives around standards-based grading. Although performance assessments and summative projects are fairly common across the cohort (86% of teachers said they use them at least sometimes), offering students choices in their assessment format or timing is still quite rare. While disconnecting student habits of success (e.g. time management, responsibility) from grades is a common starting point for many schools, teachers expressed many concerns about the potential downsides of this for both students' development of those habits and their own workloads. Other barriers to implementation in this area are logistical, including the challenges of using district and state reporting systems that do not align with competency-based grading, or the difficulty of communicating nuanced feedback to families about students' progress using existing platforms.

Timely differentiated support: Over 65% of teachers in Cohort 2 agreed that all students receive support when they need it, and many emphasized the benefits of providing personalized support for both low- and high-achieving students, noting that this is a significant lever for educational equity. Teachers emphasized the need for personal relationships with their students, as well as the need for scheduling flexibility, to implement this principle well.

Personalized pathways: In terms of providing school credit for "anytime, anywhere learning," there is a gap between what most Cohort 2 schools' policies permit and what teachers actually do. This is often due to logistical challenges. However, many schools are building structures that will help reduce those challenges, such as weekly "leaving to learn" days, internships, and community-based projects. In the classroom, only 30% of teachers say that students in their classes are working on different things on any given day, indicating the need for a shift in classroom management practices to fully realize this principle.

Mastery-based progression: Many teachers in Cohort 2 allow students to move through course content at their own speed. However, allowing students to move on to new courses or grade levels when ready is very rare. These changes often require significant redesign of school structures, and most Cohort 2 schools have not yet reached that level of transformation.

Equity: Equity is not defined by a set of practices, but rather an intentional focus on identifying and dismantling systems of oppression that impact all areas of practice. A significant majority (76%) of teachers agreed that their schools' practices and policies are driven by a commitment to educational equity, and this theme came up frequently in discussions of both their implementation of CRS MBL practices and the benefits thereof. In particular, schools noted the benefits of a CRS MBL approach for many students who have struggled in more traditional approaches, particularly noting benefits for students with disabilities, disengaged and undercredentialed students, and multilingual learners. However, systemic inequities also hinder implementation of CRS MBL practices. For example, many Cohort 2 schools have large populations of students experiencing poverty; at these schools, simply meeting students' basic needs and removing barriers to participation and learning requires a significant amount of the staff's time and resources. Additionally, schools with less funding, whether due to community socioeconomic factors or because of state funding models that provide them with less per student, face more challenges in providing CTE opportunities or other access to anytime, anywhere learning opportunities.

Barriers to Implementation

The most commonly reported barriers to implementation of CRS MBL practices were familiar from previous MBLC evaluation reports: building buy-in and managing staff mindsets; managing the many competing demands on teachers' time; identifying strategic starting points and managing the change management process in such a comprehensive reform initiative; and building the right team, especially amidst turnover. An additional hindrance to implementation that was particularly salient during the 2024-2025 school year was uncertainty about the future. Amidst a challenging and changing political environment, a state budget crisis, and the current OSPI project to revise Washington state standards, many schools expressed concern about investing deeply in work that

might not be able to continue long-term. Although this did not diminish their commitment or belief in the importance of the work, it did cast a shadow of uncertainty that sometimes hindered progress.

Supports for Implementation

MBLC grant funding was identified as a key lever, primarily because of the space it created for this work to happen. Cohort 2 schools universally identified the immense value of the coaching and professional learning provided as part of the MBLC initiative, as well as the way in which the consistent structure and expectations of the grant made them continuously prioritize this work. Schools also mentioned that a building culture that encouraged collaboration, comfort with ambiguity, and a willingness to take risks and try new things was an important supportive factor in beginning this work, as well as consistent and fully-invested building leadership.

Benefits

Even at this early stage of implementation, Cohort 2 schools identified many benefits to culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning. This included student outcomes like increased engagement, clarity about their own learning, and a sense of belonging at school. Participants also mentioned benefits for their schools such as increased collaboration among staff, acceleration of work towards preexisting priorities, and meaningful changes to school structures based on increased student voice and input.

Recommendations

Detailed recommendations for continuing growth in CRS MBL implementation at the school level are included throughout the report. In this section, we focus on recommendations for the State Board of Education as they continue leading the MBLC.

1. **Continue to invest in public perceptions work**, building a base of support for CRS MBL at both the grassroots level and in the state legislature, to counteract the instability and concerns of fluctuating support for the work.

2. **Continue to provide personalized coaching and professional learning, while also investigating new methods of doing so**, such as increasing schools' ability to learn from each other. Professional learning is particularly necessary in areas that would support increased implementation of CRSE, such as developing educators' own cultural competence and critical consciousness. Given the number of schools in Cohort 2 that are already quite far along in implementation of CRS MBL practices, opportunities exist to build a system for peer leadership, such as identifying and featuring schools with particular areas of expertise in the cohort (e.g. "this school did great work on this topic; talk to them") or building a collaborative space into the MBLC website where schools could contact each other and use a discussion board to communicate and post resources about various topics. The Cohort 1 Year 4 report contains a similar recommendation and suggests using

Educational Service Districts to create localized networks for ongoing peer-to-peer consulting and support.

3. **Develop a comprehensive community engagement strategy** to support local community partnerships that support CRSE implementation. Movements like community schools could provide valuable additional perspectives and guidance on family and community engagement and rigorous, community-connected instruction.

4. **Investigate and support policy changes**, including changes to school funding rules such as those authorized under SB 5189 to designate funding for students enrolled in CBE programs to ensure access to adequate resources for applied learning and CTE experiences at all types of schools, including ALEs. Another area for policy consideration is around class and school size, to create conditions that allow teachers to build personal relationships with all of their students and provide timely differentiated support.

5. **Audit reporting and communication systems for ease of use**. Develop more efficient and easier-to-use templates and processes for MBLC schools to communicate with SBE and PLP coaches, to ensure clarity of communication across all parties. In addition, collaborate with OSPI to adapt the state reporting system (CEDARS), to make it easier to use for schools implementing standards-based or competency-based grading, as well as cross-curricular course crediting.

6. **Advocate to Washington universities to update their teacher preparation programs to include a clearer focus on culturally responsive-sustaining education and mastery-based learning**. Washington public universities have already endorsed the CRS MBL movement through their acceptance of mastery-based transcripts; this recommendation would take that endorsement a step farther by embedding CRS MBL in teacher preparation. This may include encouraging more student teacher placements at MBLC schools, so that new teachers gain familiarity with CRS MBL approaches in addition to more traditional comprehensive approaches, or other innovative approaches such as developing teaching teams (see, for example, the ASU MLFTC Next Education Workforce project).

Introduction

Washington's Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative

The Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative (MBLC) is a demonstration project taking place in almost 50 schools from 26 districts across the state of Washington. The MBLC work is led by the Washington State Board of Education (SBE) with support from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB). Participating schools are receiving funding and participating in professional learning and a statewide network to support implementation of mastery-based learning (MBL) and culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE). The initiative's overarching goal is "to inform future policy by offering insights into what high-quality MBL looks like, the time required for implementation, and the resources needed for success (Washington State Board of Education, n.d.)."

Washington State funds the project. This funding includes school grants, professional learning, project evaluation, and administration. Washington's budget included $1.5 million in FY2022 and $3.5 million in FY2023 to implement mastery-based learning in school district demonstration sites to address learning recovery and other educational issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional funding was appropriated by OSPI (through ESSER funds) and the state legislature for fiscal years 2024 and 2025. Funding for fiscal years 2026 and 2027 has decreased to $1 million per year due to a statewide budget deficit.

The MBLC is composed of two cohorts of schools: Cohort 1 began in December 2021, and Cohort 2 began in January 2024. All participating schools completed an application process to join the Collaborative, and there has been some fluctuation in cohort membership over time, with a few schools leaving and other schools joining the cohort late to take their place. Each cohort is actively supported for four years, and each year has a different focus, as follows:

1. Year 1: Application and planning
2. Year 2: Professional learning and early implementation
3. Year 3: Implementation
4. Year 4: Deepened implementation and sustainability planning

Schools in the MBLC represent a wide variety of grade levels, community sizes, geographic locations, student and teacher demographics, urbanicities, and school types, as shown in Table 1 below.

MBLC schools also represent a wide range of CRS MBL implementation, from schools early in their journey to schools with well-established CRS MBL practices. Each school's next steps on planning, professional learning, and implementation are therefore tailored to their local needs and goals concerning CRS MBL. Each school has an MBLC school team consisting of three to six teachers and one or more school leaders who lead the school's MBLC planning and implementation. Some schools also request input and support from youth advisors. Each school is also paired with an

external coach, who supports their school team throughout the multi-year process. All schools also participate in network-wide professional learning activities throughout the year.

Table 1: MBLC member schools

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Overall
Total number of schools[2]	22	24	46
Total number of districts	13	15	26
School level			
Elementary (grades K-5)	1 (5%)	4 (17%)	5 (11%)
Elementary and middle (grades K-8)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	1 (2%)
Middle (grades 6-8)	6 (27%)	0 (0%)	6 (13%)
Middle and high (grades 6-12)	5 (23%)	1 (4%)	6 (13%)
High (grades 9-12)	10 (45%)	15 (62%)	25 (54%)
K-12	0 (0%)	3 (13%)	3 (7%)
School type			
Alternative	7 (32%)	8 (33%)	15 (33%)
Comprehensive	12 (55%)	10 (42%)	22 (48%)
Open Doors	0 (0%)	2 (8%)	2 (4%)
Virtual	0 (0%)	1 (4%)	1 (2%)
Vocational / career and technical	3 (13%)	3 (13%)	6 (13%)
Locale			
City	4 (18%)	11 (46%)	15 (33%)
Rural	4 (18%)	4 (17%)	8 (17%)
Suburban	8 (36%)	9 (37%)	17 (37%)
Town	6 (28%)	0 (0%)	6 (13%)

Source: SBE Internal MBLC Program Data

[2] This is a count of the actual number of schools, not grantees. In a few circumstances, multiple schools from the same district share an MBLC grant.

Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Mastery-Based Learning

> *"Culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning is a way to transform our education system. With this approach, teaching methods are designed to equitably engage each and every student in ways that best support the individual student's learning journey."*
>
> *(Muller, 2020, p. 7)*

The Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative (MBLC) is based on two interrelated concepts: mastery-based learning and culturally responsive-sustaining education. Together, these two approaches guide the classroom-level, school-level, and system-level reforms addressed in this project. Although initially the initiative named MBL and CRSE separately, subsequently, the initiative has begun to refer to "CRS MBL," or culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning, to emphasize their interconnection.

Washington defined **mastery-based learning (MBL)**[3] in SB5189 in 2025 as follows (Washington State Legislature, 2025):

- 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;
- Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence;
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs;
- Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time;
- Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing;
- Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems; and
- Rigorous, common expectations for learning, including knowledge, skills, and dispositions, are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable.

The MBLC also emphasizes **culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE)**, which is defined based on an adapted definition from New York: "Culturally responsive-sustaining education is grounded in a cultural view of learning and human development in which multiple expressions of diversity (e.g., race, social class, gender identity, language, nationality, religion, disability) are recognized and regarded as assets for teaching and learning" (New York State Education Department, n.d.; Washington State Board of Education, n.d.).

Culturally relevant pedagogy, as first developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings, offers a framework for improving the educational experiences of students who have been historically marginalized based on their racial, ethnic, and social identities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach centers three key

[3] Mastery-based learning and competency-based learning are used interchangeably in this report.

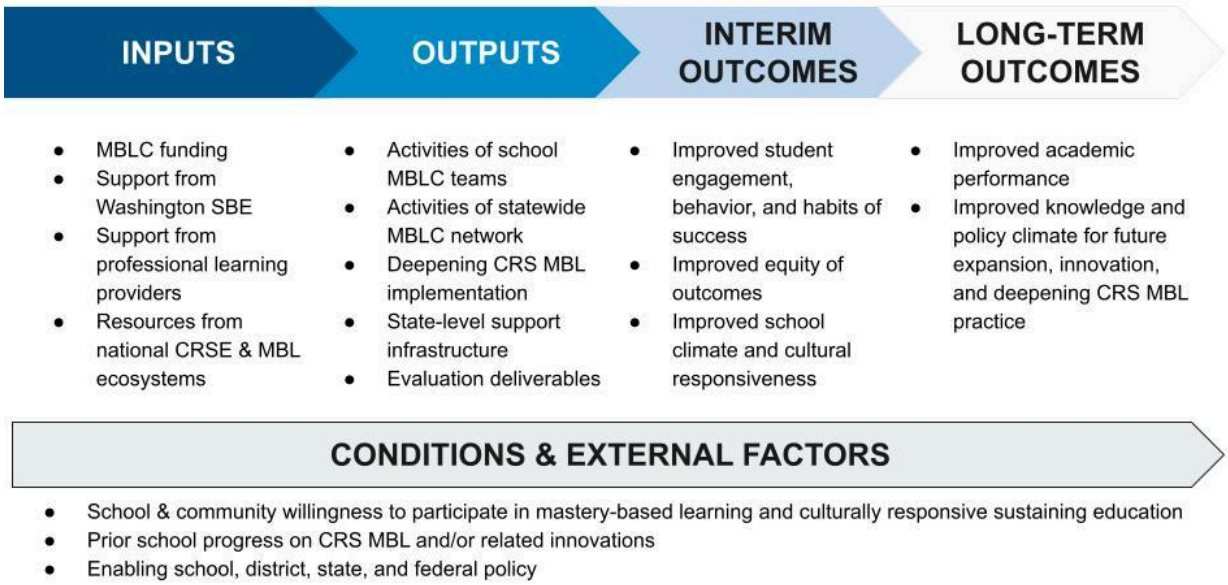
goals: 1) academic success, 2) cultural competence, and 3) critical consciousness—encouraging students to recognize and challenge social inequities. It affirms and leverages the culture and lived experiences of students of color as assets in the learning process, rather than treating them as deficits or ignoring them altogether. Building on Ladson-Billings' work, 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.

Evaluation Overview

FullScale (formerly the Aurora Institute) is the external evaluator of the MBLC on behalf of SBE. The evaluation is intended to contribute to the identification of effective policies, practices, and system changes that can support CRS MBL implementation throughout Washington's K-12 education system.

The evaluation design is based on the MBLC logic model, which is shown in Figure 1 below. In this report, we will explore inputs that support the MBLC work, including funding and state support, professional learning and coaching, and access to national resources about mastery-based learning and culturally responsive sustaining education; outputs and activities conducted in year 2; and the conditions and external factors that impact implementation. We will not yet explore interim outcomes, except with early anecdotal evidence, as it is too early in Cohort 2's implementation journey to anticipate seeing any early outcomes.

Figure 1: MBLC logic model



The guiding research questions for this multi-year evaluation are as follows:

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 CRS MBL at the selected schools?
4. What school conditions and external factors helped or impeded CRS MBL implementation?
5. 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?
6. What implementation practices or conditions contributed to the reported impacts or lack of impact?

This report focuses on Cohort 2 schools in their second year[4] of MBLC participation, unless otherwise specified. Because it is still early in these schools' MBLC journeys, we present only preliminary findings to some of these research questions, particularly questions 2, 5, and 6. In future years, we will make cross-year comparisons to deepen our understanding of these questions.

Table 2: Common abbreviations

- CBE: Competency-based education *(used interchangeably with mastery-based learning throughout this report)*
- CRS MBL: Culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning
- CRSE: Culturally responsive-sustaining education
- EL: English Learners
- GSP: Great Schools Partnership
- MBL: Mastery-based learning
- MBLC: Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative
- OSPI: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction
- PESB: Professional Educator Standards Board
- SBE: State Board of Education
- UDL: Universal Design for Learning

[4] For Cohort 2, year 1 was abbreviated, as they began activities in January 2024 of the 2023-2024 school year. Year 2 refers to the entirety of the 2024-2025 school year.

Evaluation Methods

As in previous years, we employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection in SY25. We collected data from a wide variety of stakeholders across Cohort 2 schools to hear from as many perspectives as possible.

Data collection activities took place at two points in the 2024-2025 school year. In October 2024, we administered a survey to all teachers and school leaders in Cohort 2. Then, in March 2025, we conducted site visits at a small subset of Cohort 2 schools and interviewed teachers and school leaders at those sites. In addition to these school-level data collection activities, we also conducted interviews in May 2025 with representatives from the professional learning provider, Great Schools Partnership (GSP) and the State Board of Education (SBE). The topics we explored in each of these activities can be found in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Data collection topics

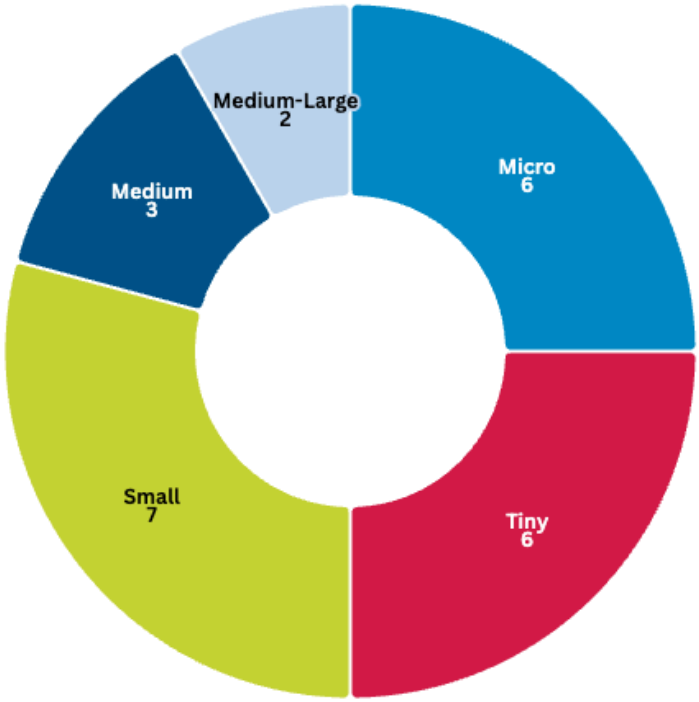
	Stakeholders			
Evaluation topic	**Teachers**	**School leaders**	**GSP**	**SBE**
Attitudes and beliefs about CRS MBL	x	x	x	
Changes to teaching and learning activities	x	x	x	
Changes to school structures and culture	x	x	x	
Factors that support or impede progress	x	x	x	x
Professional learning experiences	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		

Cohort 2 School Characteristics

The 24 schools in Cohort 2 represent a wide variety of communities and learning experiences. The cohort is comprised of 15 high schools (63%), four elementary schools, one middle and high school, one K-8 school, and three K-12 schools. The cohort includes ten comprehensive schools (42%), eight alternative schools (33%), three vocational/career and technical schools (13%), two Open Doors schools focused on student reengagement (8%), and one virtual school.

Cohort 2 schools are primarily urban (46%) and suburban (38%), with no schools in towns and only 17% of the participating schools in rural settings (NCES, n.d.). As shown in Figure 2 below, **the schools in Cohort 2 tend to be relatively small**: half of the schools in the cohort have fewer than 50 students per grade, and only 5 of the 24 schools (21%) have more than 100 students per grade. We were particularly interested in school size because of the common critique that CRS MBL can only be implemented effectively in small schools.

Figure 2: Cohort 2 schools by size



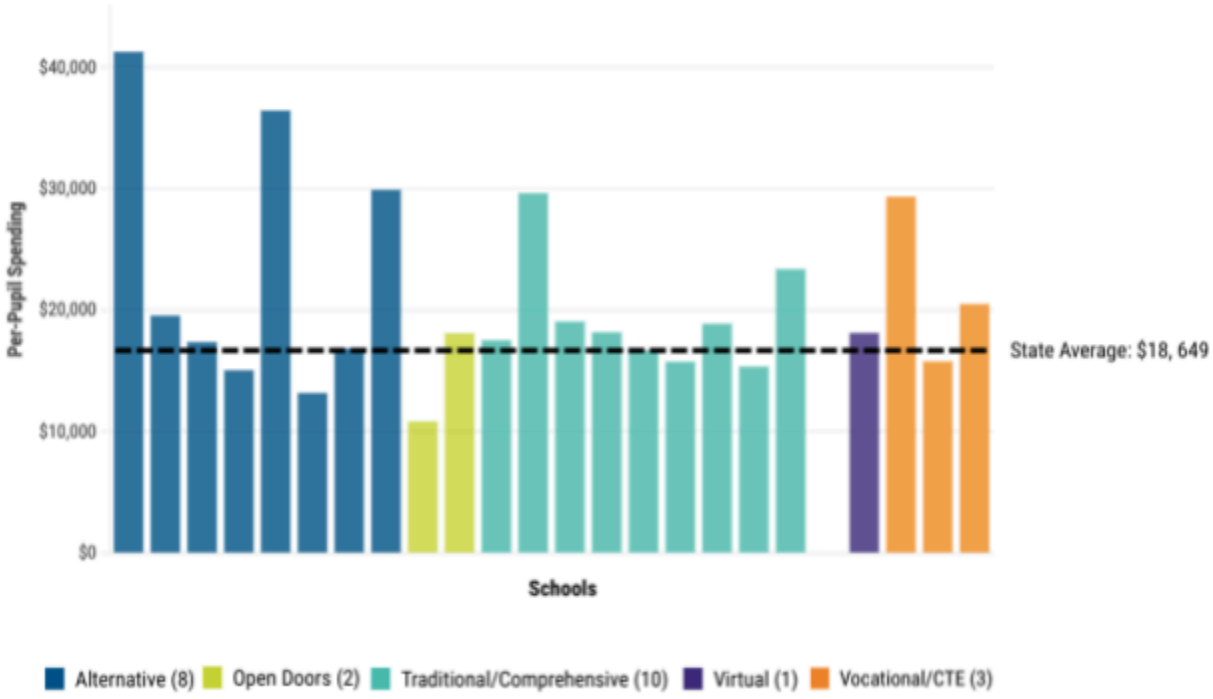
Source: Washington State Report Card (2023-24 SY)
Note: Micro=fewer than 20 students per grade; Tiny=20-50 students per grade; Small=50-100 students per grade; Medium=100-200 students per grade; Medium-Large=200-400 students per grade.

In addition to school size, we also examined the **percentages of students experiencing poverty, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners (ELL)**, as these characteristics often predict differences in learning opportunities and outcomes among students (National Council on Disability, 2018; Friedlaender et al, 2014). **There was considerable variability across the cohort on**

each of these characteristics. The average percentage of students experiencing poverty across all Cohort 2 schools was 51%, but it ranged from 15% to over 95% at individual schools, with no apparent connection to school size. The average percentage of students with disabilities across all Cohort 2 schools was 22%, but again, the range at individual schools was significant, from 9% to 42%. Here, there was a clear connection to school size, with larger schools having a smaller percentage of their student body identified as students with disabilities than smaller schools. Lastly, the average percent of ELLs across all Cohort 2 schools was 8%, but again, that varied, ranging from 0% to 27% at individual schools, with no discernible difference in ELL enrollment based on school size.

As shown in Figure 3, **per-pupil expenditures vary widely across Cohort 2 schools** (minimum $10,816 per year; maximum $41,257 per year). The cohort-wide average per-pupil spending in the 2023-24 school year was $20,712.54, which is slightly higher than the statewide average of $18,649.00 (Washington State Report Card, n.d.). The above-average spending per pupil in 2023-24 could be a reflection of the grant funding received by Cohort 2 schools that year; however, this requires further investigation. Regardless, there is significant variability across Cohort 2 schools in terms of school spending.

Figure 3: Cohort 2 per-pupil spending by school and school type



Source: Washington State Report Card (2023-24 SY)
Note: School ID 982 is not visualized because data was not available for this school.

There was also **substantial variability in standardized test scores across the cohort**. On average, Cohort 2 schools had lower percentages of students showing foundational grade level knowledge and skills in tested subjects compared to the rest of the state, as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Cohort 2 school exam achievement compared to state averages

	C2 minimum	C2 maximum	C2 average	State average
ELA	16.1%	91.5%	65.3%	70.8%
Math	12.8%	90.7%	54.5%	62.7%
Science	8.6%	94.6%	58.2%	62.0%

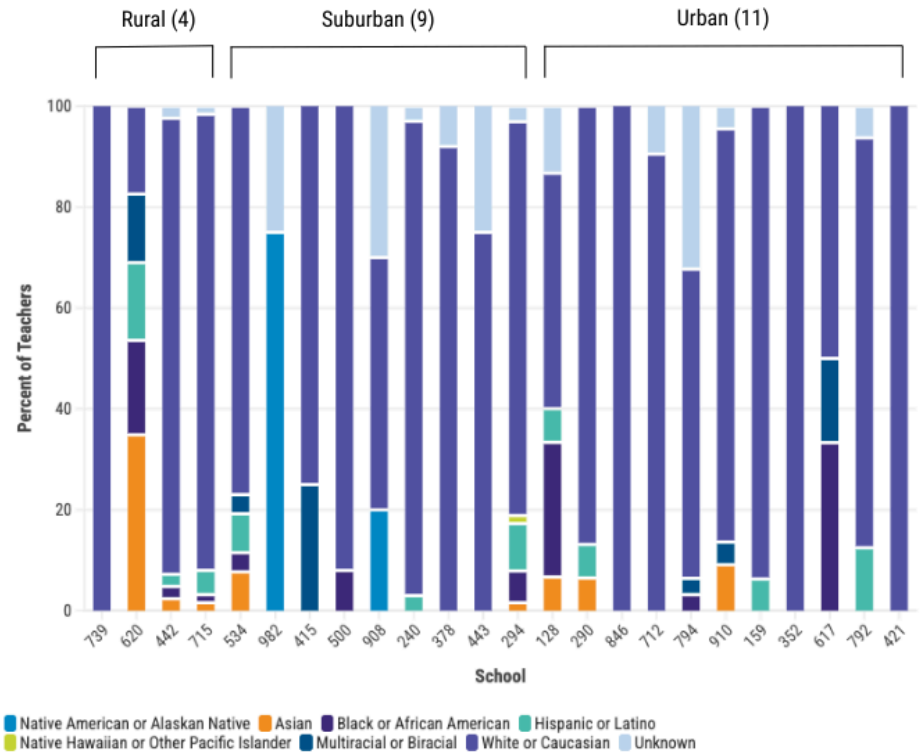
Source: Washington State Report Card (Spring 2024)

Note: This table shows the percent of students showing grade level or higher knowledge and skills in each subject. The columns "C2 minimum" and "C2 maximum" show the percent of students reaching that threshold at the lowest and highest performing schools in the cohort.

Cohort 2 schools also vary widely in the racial composition of both the student body and the teacher workforce, as shown in Figures 4 and 5 below. However, **the teacher workforce across Cohort 2 schools is overwhelmingly White** (with a few clear outliers). This mirrors the rest of the state, where the teaching workforce is 81.2% White (Washington State Report Card, n.d.). There is no obvious connection between the size of the school and the diversity of the staff or student body; however, there does generally seem to be less racial diversity in rural schools.

Figure 4: Student race by school and locale

Figure 5: Teacher race by school and locale



Source: Washington State Report Card (2023-2024 SY)

Note: School 534 is omitted from both visualizations because its data was not publicly available.

Instruments and Procedures

Teacher and School Leader Surveys

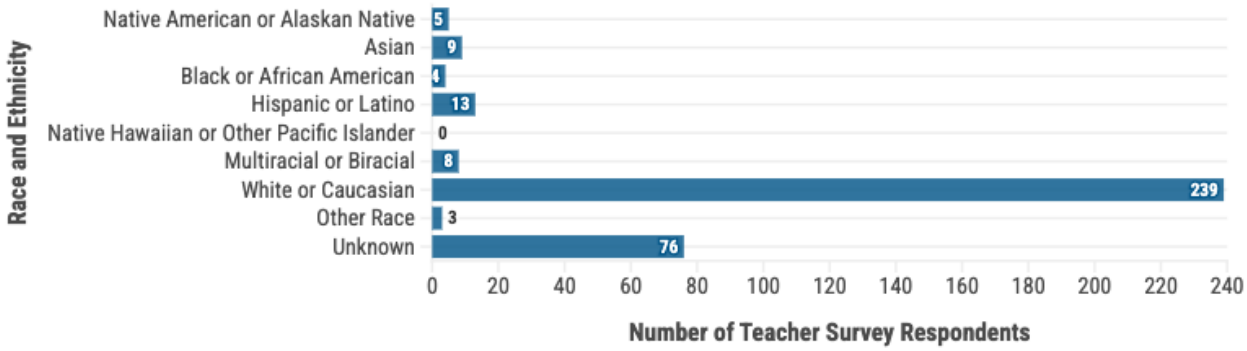
The teacher and school leader surveys were developed by the Aurora Institute (now FullScale) and modified based on feedback from SBE staff. In order to ensure comparability across years and cohorts, very few changes have been made to the survey over the past few years, although certain items have been removed, revised, or added for clarity of understanding and analysis. The surveys take approximately 15 minutes to complete and address educators' knowledge and beliefs about CRS MBL, educator practices, school-level policies and practices, and professional learning experiences. The full survey instruments can be found in Appendices A and B of the MBLC Cohort 2 Year 2 Technical Report.

The teacher survey was sent to teachers, paraprofessionals, and any other members of the learning community who directly oversee classroom instruction and assessment. We received a list of recipient names and email addresses from school leaders early in 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 for the entire month of October. We sent weekly email reminders directly to recipients throughout the month; we also sent overall participation rates to school leaders so they could remind their staff to take the survey.

Ultimately, responses were received from all 24 schools in Cohort 2, with a cohort-wide teacher survey response rate of 66% and school leader survey response rate of 85%. However, there was considerable variability in response rates across schools, ranging from 20% to 100%.

We collected demographic data as part of the teacher survey (though not the school leader survey), in order to compare the sample of survey respondents to the demographics of the cohort overall. The majority of teacher survey responses came from high school teachers (64%), followed by elementary teachers (21%), combined middle and high school teachers (9%) middle school teachers (4%), K-12 teachers (2%), and K-8 teachers (<1%). We did not receive demographic data from all teachers. Those who did report their gender were overwhelmingly female (53% female, 26% male, 2% nonbinary, and 19% unreported). Those who reported their race were overwhelmingly White, as shown in Figure 6 below. More details on the demographics of teacher survey respondents can be found in the MBLC Cohort 2 Year 2 Technical Report.

Figure 6: Teacher survey respondents by race



Teacher and School Leader Interviews and Focus Groups

In year 2, Aurora Institute (now FullScale) staff visited eight schools from Cohort 2 to conduct interviews and focus groups with teachers and school administrators. Two of those eight schools had participated in a virtual interview in year 1, but had not yet been visited in-person as part of the evaluation. The other six schools had not been visited or interviewed at all in previous years. Unfortunately, due to weather conditions impacting travel in the mountains, one school visit had to be cancelled; the interviews at that school were held virtually instead. Interviews and focus groups were conducted by the authors of this report. At three of the schools, we were also accompanied by SBE staff.

The group was designed to represent a diversity of school experiences, including school size, urbanicity, grade levels enrolled, geography, student demographics, and community socioeconomic status. At each school site, we asked to interview at least two teachers and one administrator. Schools were asked to recruit participants for the interviews that represented diverse identities and perspectives. Ultimately, we were able to interview 20 teachers and 8 school leaders. The group was diverse in terms of age, but quite experienced on average, with most respondents having between 11-20 years of experience; this was reflective of the average years of experience of the cohort. Overall, the group we spoke to was overwhelmingly White (82.1%) and female (67.9%), mirroring the demographics of the teachers in the cohort overall.

The semi-structured interview protocols were developed by Aurora (now FullScale) and modified based on feedback from SBE staff, and covered the same topics as the surveys, but provided an opportunity to gather deeper qualitative data and more nuanced insights.

Interviews with SBE and GSP Staff

The semi-structured interview protocols were drafted by Aurora (now FullScale) and modified with input from SBE staff. Both interviews were between 60-120 minutes long and 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 with Great Schools Partnership was conducted with the co-leaders of the MBLC work at GSP: 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, Aurora (now FullScale) staff attended MBLC network professional learning, both in-person and virtually. This included a webinar, a meeting with the Impact Fellows, and the 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.

Collection of Secondary Data

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

Data Analysis

This mixed-methods evaluation employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis to examine year 2 implementation of CRS MBL practices in Cohort 2 schools. The goal of mixing quantitative and qualitative methods was complementarity: "elaboration, enhancement, illustration, and clarification of the results from one method with the results from another method" (Creswell and Clark, 2018; Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, 1989). We wanted to be able to richly illustrate Cohort 2 schools' progress using stories shared from individual schools, while also taking a birds-eye view of the full cohort.

Quantitative Approach

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. We calculated frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarize educator and school leader responses and explore patterns in the direction and magnitude of responses, as well as variability across the cohort.

Qualitative Approach

Open-ended responses from surveys, interviews, and focus group transcripts 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 elements of competency-based education.

Data was 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 and implementation contexts (e.g., large school, rural), allowing for a nuanced understanding of how MBL and CRSE practices are being experienced in schools. Findings from the qualitative analysis were used to contextualize and expand quantitative results, surface specific insights and examples, and inform recommendations for policy, practice, and systems change.

Evaluator Positionality

There are two authors for the current evaluation report. Neither author is from Washington state; both have prior experience in student-centered learning and school-based education research. One author is a White woman with a master's degree; the other author is a Black woman with a doctorate. Both study authors contributed to interpreting findings and analyzing their importance for the MBLC work. It is likely that our positionality–our ethnoracial backgrounds, our education and prior experience, and 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 additional perspectives are also included, the report has been reviewed by both authors, other members of the FullScale team, and staff of the State Board of Education.

Inputs and Supports

In this section, we describe the activities undertaken and support received by Cohort 2 in the 2024-2025 school year (Year 2 of their participation in the MBLC), which we will collectively refer to as "inputs" to align with the logic model previously shown in Figure 1. These inputs fall into four broad categories: state support, funding, professional learning and coaching support, and resources from the national CRS MBL ecosystem. In the pages that follow, we will describe what support activities occurred, so as to better understand how they contributed to the findings described in the subsequent section of this report.

State Support

Schools in Cohort 2 continued to receive significant support from the State Board of Education throughout their second school year in the initiative. Most of the work supporting school-level planning and implementation of CRS MBL practices is done by the professional learning providers and will be described in that upcoming section of the report. However, the SBE team stays in close communication with the coaches to remain aware of schools' progress and monitor contract deliverables. SBE also maintains some direct communication with the schools to monitor implementation successes and challenges, gauge community buy-in, and provide additional support as needed. The support provided to Cohort 2 schools this year from the State Board of Education is described below.

Planning Support and Budget Management

At the completion of year 1, Cohort 2 schools were required to submit work plans and budgets for the upcoming school year to the State Board of Education. These work plans, which followed a 17-page template, were divided into five parts:

1. Reflection on educational equity, culturally responsive sustaining education, and mastery-based learning
2. Reflection on the intended MBLC outcomes: implementation of CRS MBL, COVID-19 recovery, schoolwide professional learning, and meaningful ongoing youth input
3. Details of their MBLC work plan for the upcoming year
4. Plan for achieving project outcomes and ensuring sustainability after funding ends
5. Demonstration of commitment to MBLC work within school and community

These work plans, coupled with the self-assessment that Cohort 2 schools did in Year 1, guided schools' activities for the year. Both GSP and SBE reviewed the work plans, providing feedback and requesting clarity as necessary; the successful completion thereof was the impetus for receiving grant funding from the state. (Grant funding is described more in the next section of this report.) SBE staff then administered those grants to schools, working with district finance offices as necessary to ensure compliance with district policies and make sure the funding reached the schools for its intended purpose.

Monitoring of School Experience

SBE staff visited MBLC schools regularly in order to observe how the work was progressing and how they could provide additional clarity or support to school teams. In addition to independent visits, SBE staff accompanied GSP coaches on their fall and spring visits to Cohort 2 schools, and also joined FullScale staff evaluators on three of the Cohort 2 spring site visits. SBE staff also meet biweekly with GSP coaches to hear updates about each school and its progress, to maintain a birds-eye view of the statewide experience, and collect feedback from schools to learn what changes would be helpful in the future.

Encouragement and Morale Boosting

This year, the SBE team found itself providing more support to schools to manage the impact of the state's budget crisis on their MBLC work. The state of Washington is facing a budget crisis (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2025), and many school districts are also facing imminent local budget cuts, leaving MBLC participating schools with challenges like staffing shortages and spending restrictions. The state also experienced a gubernatorial transition in January 2025, which cast additional uncertainty over whether the state budget would include ongoing funding for the MBLC work beyond FY2025. Although eventually the new governor did approve a state budget that included some funds for the Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative work to continue, the funding levels were slashed from $5 million annually to only $1 million per year for FY2026 and FY2027, and the extended timeline for approving even that decreased level of funding caused tremendous uncertainty about the future of the work throughout the 2024-25 school year.

Beyond the funding environment, the political environment at both the national and state level has also changed dramatically over the course of the school year. The presidential election in fall 2024, and subsequent change of administration in January 2025, has resulted in an environment of significant uncertainty around not just federal funding for education in Washington state, but also anything related to DEI, including culturally responsive-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 make transformative change was an even more uphill climb than it might otherwise be. 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." Because of this, the State Board saw its role, in part, as helping to maintain schools' confidence that the state remained committed to and supportive of the work, and thus that it remained worth investing time and energy in. As one SBE team member explained,

"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? The easy thing is to say, 'Okay, well, let's just go back to what we've been doing and save ourselves because of all the challenges,' versus, 'No, let's be brave.' And I have seen the bravery among the schools. They really believe in the work. They know it's the right work."

State-Level Policy Work

This year, SBE staff have dedicated significant time and energy to continuing to build a strong base of legislative support for culturally responsive sustaining mastery-based learning. This has included advocating for the continuation of funding in the state budgetary process, as well as work to pass Senate Bill 5189, which implements a number of recommendations from previous MBLC evaluation reports.

The passage of this bill indicates a significant step forward in removing barriers to implementation of CRS MBL for Washington schools. Later in this report we describe challenges schools face with receiving adequate funding for applied and technical learning experiences, especially alternative schools. We also describe the challenge and complexity of each school developing its own standards-aligned competencies, as well as the challenge of using existing grade-reporting and transcript formats. This bill requires SBE, OSPI, and other agencies to address those challenges directly, and is a promising step for the long-term sustainability and growth of this work.

Student Advisory Work

This year for the first time the State Board of Education 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 can not only inform the MBLC work directly, but also serve as a way to "build the muscle" of creating space for meaningful youth voice among participating schools. As one SBE staff member explained,

"I think [youth voice] is important as we think about how this can sustain itself. After funding is gone, how do we make sure students are talking about this? How do we make sure that adults are involving students in decisions? Something that 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."

The youth advisory work has taken the format of an advisory board of 26 students from across 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 hopes to expose them to different implementation practices and continue to spur the networked peer learning that is so central to the MBLC model.

Overall Project and Network Management

As in previous years, the State Board of Education also provided logistical and project management support to keep the MBLC initiative running: managing contracts with various partners, coordinating with coaches, responding to new needs that arose, collecting feedback and making adjustments for future years, and helping to gather lessons learned and connect schools to each other for peer learning across the state. These behind-the-scenes efforts laid the foundation for Cohort 2's deep professional learning and early implementation work.

Grant Funding

Grantees in Cohort 2 were eligible to receive up to $100,000 for activities in Year 2. The vast majority of grantees were single schools; however, there were two instances where multiple schools in the same district shared a grant. Overall, 19 grants were distributed to a total of 24 schools in Cohort 2. All of the grants hovered right around $100,000, with the total amount of funding requested for Cohort 2 in the 2024-25 school year equaling $1,898,935.55.

How Funding Was Spent

We reviewed the Cohort 2 grant applications and found that funding in the 2024-2025 school year fell into the following six categories[5]:

1. **Staff coverage:** costs associated with paying substitutes, paid time, or covering part of a salary to create time for school staff to do work associated with the MBLC
2. **Curricular and learning resources:** classroom materials to support CRS MBL, annual license costs for various programs/curricula, paid time to develop and/or align new curriculum and assessments
3. **Stakeholder engagement:** costs associated with student, family, and community participation in MBLC related activities
4. **Instructional professional development:** costs associated with staff learning, including registration and travel costs to conferences and site visits, book study materials, consultants to help with specific work, and paid time or stipends to cover PD time

[5] This is a slight adaptation of the categories provided in the iGrant system and used in the grant applications. The categories of Supervision (21), Teaching (27), and Guidance/Counseling (24) were collapsed into "Staff coverage", and the categories of Curriculum (33) and Learning Resources (22) were also combined. This was to account for the inconsistency in categorization across the cohort. Additionally, Principal's Office (23) was renamed "Stakeholder engagement" for clarity, as all schools who allocated funding to this category used it for that purpose. Categories provided in iGrant that were not used by any schools, such as Pupil Management and Safety (25), were dropped from this analysis.

5. **Instructional technology:** costs to purchase hardware to support personalized learning, software developer to build customized competency tracking systems, and purchase and setup of learning management systems that are better aligned with an MBL approach
6. **Indirect costs:** administrative and general overhead costs

Of these six categories, the vast majority of the grant money (42%) was spent on instructional professional development, followed by staff coverage (32%). The distribution of funding across all six categories can be found in Table 5 below. Instructional professional development funds were largely used to cover travel and registration costs for conferences, site visits, and MBLC statewide learning events. Staff coverage funding was largely used to compensate current school staff for the extra time spent on MBLC work, although a few schools used it to hire a new position or adjust an existing staff member's FTE allocation.

Table 5: Allocation of grant funding

Category	Funding requested	Percent of total
Instructional professional development	$794,730.55	41.9%
Staff coverage	$615,999.00	32.4%
Curricular and learning resources	$286,463.12	15.1%
Indirect costs	$135,630.00	7.1%
Stakeholder engagement	$43,180.00	2.3%
Instructional technology	$22,932.88	1.2%
Total	$1,898,935.55	100%

In the curricular and learning resources category, most schools requested money to pay for project materials or new curriculum that is better aligned with CRS MBL principles. However, a few schools requested large sums to make a substantial investment in infrastructure that would be aligned with their plans for CRS MBL implementation. For example, one school requested funding to build an outdoor kitchen[6], which they described as follows:

> *"Community space that will center indigenous communities and cultural competencies. The space will be centered around sustainable food preparation, traditional ways of knowing and being, and tribal sovereignty. The space will serve as a conduit to support professional learning with staff by bringing in indigenous knowledge keepers to teach staff about cultural knowledge. In addition, this space will support student learning towards state standards and Big Picture Learning*

[6] Although this particular project was ultimately stalled and funds were redirected, we include it here as an example of the sort of long-term curriculum-supporting infrastructure investment that many schools planned to make with their MBLC funding.

competencies through traditional culinary practices and relevant learning opportunities that will support literacy (Communication), mathematics (Quantitative Reasoning), and science (Empirical Reasoning)."

- Alternative high school

In the stakeholder engagement category, many schools budgeted funds for community and family engagement events or community advisory boards to support their MBLC work. Costs in this category typically fell into two camps: logistical costs (e.g. supplies, promotional materials, and planning time), as well as costs intended to help remove barriers to participation (e.g. food, translation, and transportation for participants).

In the instructional technology category, a few schools identified particular LMS providers that they intend to pilot as a solution to challenges faced with their current LMS or grading tools. One school even planned to hire an independent software developer to help them design a custom solution to track evidence of students' competency growth and progress toward graduation. However, the other schools who requested funds for this use are choosing existing solutions that they discovered through the MBLC network. As one school explained in their justification for purchasing a license for a particular LMS,

"Our Dean of Scholars K-8 attended the MBLC school visits to New York over the summer and observed that all the schools use [this program] to help streamline the standards-based grading. Our teachers are currently overwhelmed and under-resourced when it comes to tracking and maintaining grades.... We have already started the pilot program last year and are working to get our Data Manager trained.... Our Dean who saw the program in action in NY loved what she saw and how much the scholars understood about the process of assessing standards. She was highly impressed and believes this is the program we need to assure our teachers, scholars, and their families that this doesn't need to feel like an overwhelming pivot and can actually make everyone's life and education more simple and easy to understand."

- Alternative K-12 school

Overall, funding is seen as a key enabler to implementation, but sustainability is a concern. In interviews with school leaders on the topic of funding and sustainability, many pointed out the ways in which the state funding has allowed them to carve out time and space to do work they've known is important for a long time but not always been able to prioritize. As one high school principal at an alternative school explained,

"Funding is challenging to find. Schools like ours, who are in communities that are not choosing to afford extra funding to schools like this, have a really different experience, because, you know, the staffing is so key. Staff, and then having enough staff to be able to run a program like this, are two pretty important components."

- Alternative high school principal

Although the funding was seen as a key lever to kickstart this work, the question of sustainability–especially in the context of the uncertain funding landscape in the state–was top of mind for many school leaders, even at this early stage in their MBLC experience. As another leader said,

> *"This couldn't have launched as well as it's launched here without funding. It really gave me and the teachers the opportunity to either time-card for the additional work–and it's a* lot *of work–or cover release time to take a day, collaborate on aligning those content standards, visit schools, all that. So really, the grant has been extremely helpful in that. I've been intentional about the stewardship of those funds, and really careful to not fund things that can't sustain."*
>
> - Vocational / career and technical high school principal

Professional Learning and Coaching

Professional learning and coaching for the Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative during the 2024-2025 school year was provided by the Great Schools Partnership (GSP). Five coaches from GSP supported the 24 schools in Cohort 2, with each coach supporting anywhere from three to six schools. The GSP team is not based in Washington state, so the coaching happened predominantly over Zoom, although each coach also visited their Cohort 2 schools twice in the year: once in October and once in May. Professional learning support was broken into two buckets: cohort-wide learning and school-specific coaching.

Cohort-Wide Learning

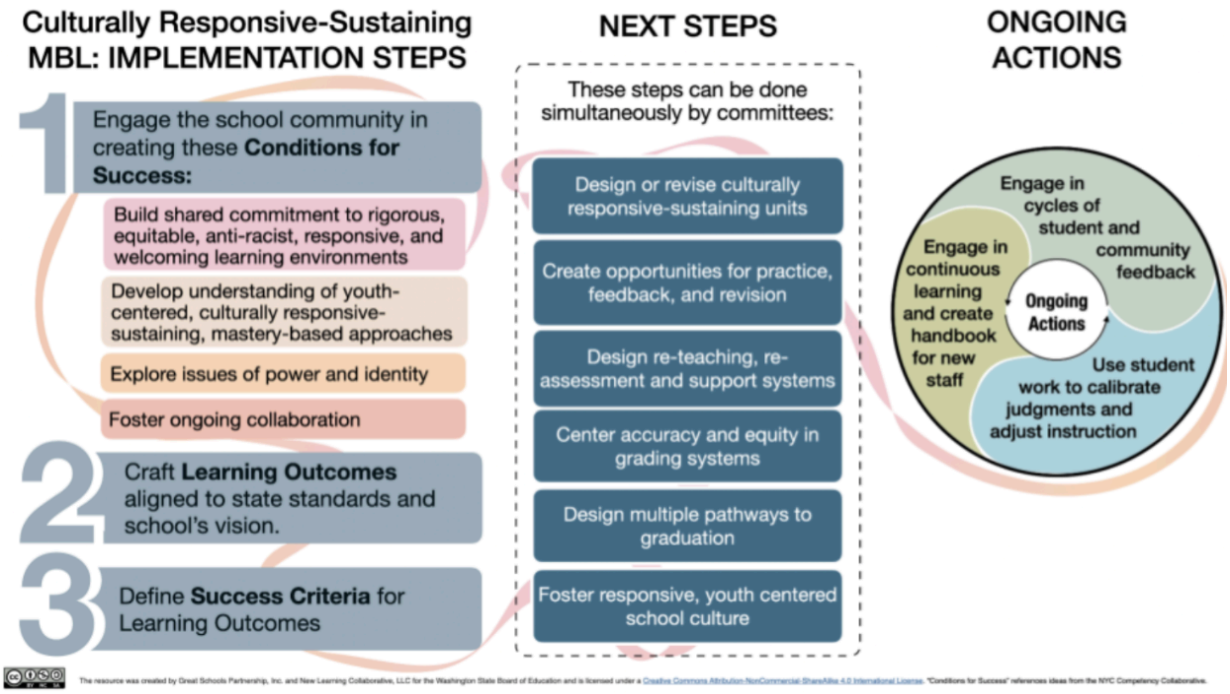
MBLC teams were asked to attend one network-wide meeting per month throughout the school year (except for December and April). Most of those meetings happened online, but two were held in-person. The monthly online meetings lasted approximately two hours and included a 30-45 minute webinar segment followed by a 1-hour breakout room discussion with educators from other schools. Each monthly meeting had a topical theme and was intended to include content that would be useful to schools no matter where they were at in their implementation journey. In a change based on feedback from previous years, participants could choose which breakout room discussion they attended, thereby allowing them to personalize their learning.

In addition to the monthly full-cohort events, GSP also organized two optional monthly gatherings for particular groups of educators. The first was a BIPOC affinity group, which was designed for all BIPOC staff members at MBLC schools who wanted to attend. The goal of this group was to provide support for BIPOC educators working in MBLC schools, both in order 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 support 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, GSP also organizes various events to support learning from peers. In addition to the two in-person gatherings each year, and facilitating connections and visits between different MBLC schools across the state, GSP maintains a regular cadence of blog posts on the MBLC community site telling stories of innovations happening at MBLC schools. GSP also organized a visit in March 2025 for educator teams to visit the NYC Competency Collaborative Schools in New York. GSP coaches also frequently share resources from organizations around the country to respond to schools' questions and interests.

Figure 7: Stages of CRS MBL implementation



Source: Great Schools Partnership

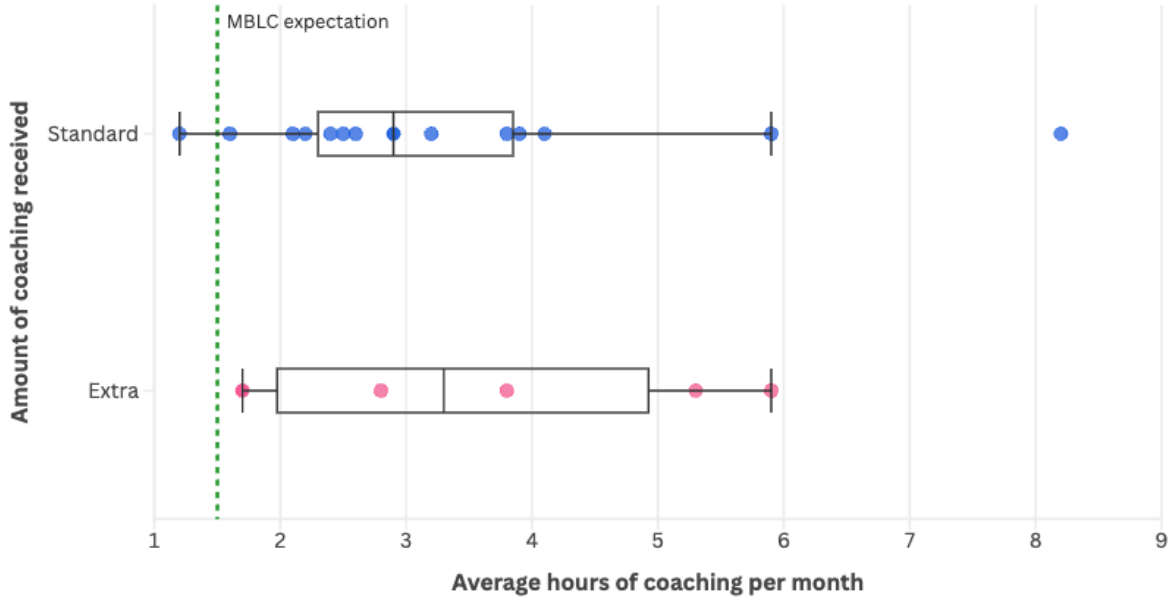
School-Specific Coaching

Each Cohort 2 school's MBLC leadership team was paired with a coach from GSP, who supported the team in developing and enacting their workplan. This personalized coaching work was guided by the school team's self-assessment, which GSP developed for Cohort 2 based on feedback from Cohort 1. The self-assessment was designed to help schools identify what stage they were at in implementation of CRS MBL, as described in Figure 7 above. Together, the self-assessment, workplan, and implementation framework guided the coaching that each school received. This meant there was significant variation in how each school spent their time with their coach, based on where they were at in their school's journey. Topics discussed during coaching meetings varied widely, including such diverse topics as developing a Portrait of a Graduate, calibrating scoring on

shared rubrics, planning PLC meeting content, and addressing teacher questions and concerns about new grading policies.

Each Cohort 2 school was expected to meet with their coach for at least 1.5 hours per month[7]. The vast majority of schools did so, and some exceeded this target by a wide margin. The variability in the amount of coaching across the cohort is shown in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: Amount of coaching received by school



Source: Great Schools Partnership 2024-25 WA MBLC Monthly Activity Tracker
Notes: The "Amount of coaching received" designation refers to whether the school had an additional contract with GSP or not – schools designated as "Extra" had additional contracted coaching hours that they paid for using their MBLC grant funding. In these boxplots, the box represents the interquartile range (25th to 75th percentile), and the line inside the box represents the median.

Overall, teachers and school leaders reported in the survey that they found most of the topics addressed in their professional learning "very useful" of "somewhat useful." In fact, across all of the topics listed, on average 63.8% of teachers and 67.2% of school leaders found them "very useful." This points to the strong alignment between content provided by GSP at the cohort-wide webinars and the learning needs and interests of participating Cohort 2 schools.

The professional learning topics that teachers and school leaders found most useful are shown in Table 6 below; interestingly, summative assessment (including performance-based assessment) appears on both lists, indicating that both teachers and school leaders found that content to be particularly useful in their learning journeys. In contrast, school leaders identified the training on

[7] Six schools in Cohort 2 also developed separate contracts with GSP to provide additional coaching beyond what was provided through the MBLC.

equity and CRSE as the most useful topic they covered, with 81.1% of respondents describing it as "very useful", while for teachers, this ranked #8 out of the 10 topics in the survey, with only 60.2% of teachers identifying it as "very useful." The complete details on the utility of each professional learning topic are provided in the appendices to this report.

Table 6: Most useful professional learning topics

	Teachers		School leaders	
Rank	Topic	"Very useful"	Topic	"Very useful"
1	Helping students develop **"habits of success"** such as communication and collaboration	75%	Implementing strategies for **equitable, culturally responsive-sustaining education**	81%
2	Using a variety of **summative assessments**, including performance-based assessments	68%	Implementing strategies that give **students more voice and choice** in their learning	76%
3	Organizing learning around **higher-level competencies** and transferable skills	67%	Using a variety of **summative assessments**, including performance-based assessments	70%

Sources: MBLC Teacher Survey, October 2024 (n=272-282, varied by item) and MBLC School Leader Survey, October 2024 (n=51) *Notes: The topics listed here were ranked from a list of 10 possible PD topics on the survey. It is likely that individual schools also experienced more tailored and granular professional learning that they found very useful that is not captured here.*

Resources from National Ecosystem

There are many states, schools, and organizations nationwide also working to advance culturally responsive and sustaining education and mastery-based learning. In an effort to connect MBLC schools to helpful resources and events that might support their professional learning, as well as share important updates specific to Washington state, the State Board of Education sends out an email newsletter every other month that is also posted on the MBLC website.

School leaders and teachers mentioned many professional learning opportunities and resources that they accessed in year 2, either through their GSP coaches or independently. This included specific CBE or CRSE-focused curricula and programs, trainings and conferences on various elements of CRS MBL, educational technology hardware or software that supported personalized learning for students, and more.

Findings

Quality and Depth of Implementation

In this section, we will address the following research questions:

- **What was the quality and depth of implementation of CRS MBL at the selected schools?**
- **Was participation in the MBLC associated with changes in educator practice? Why or why not?**

Since this is the first year we are measuring educator practices, we cannot answer the question of change beyond the anecdotal evidence provided. We view this second year as important in establishing a baseline to compare educator practices in years three and four. This is especially true because year two is the professional learning year–schools were not expected to engage in implementation at this stage (although many were). Additionally, the survey data from teachers and school leaders was collected in October, early in the school year, meaning that the quality and depth of implementation could have increased after data collection.

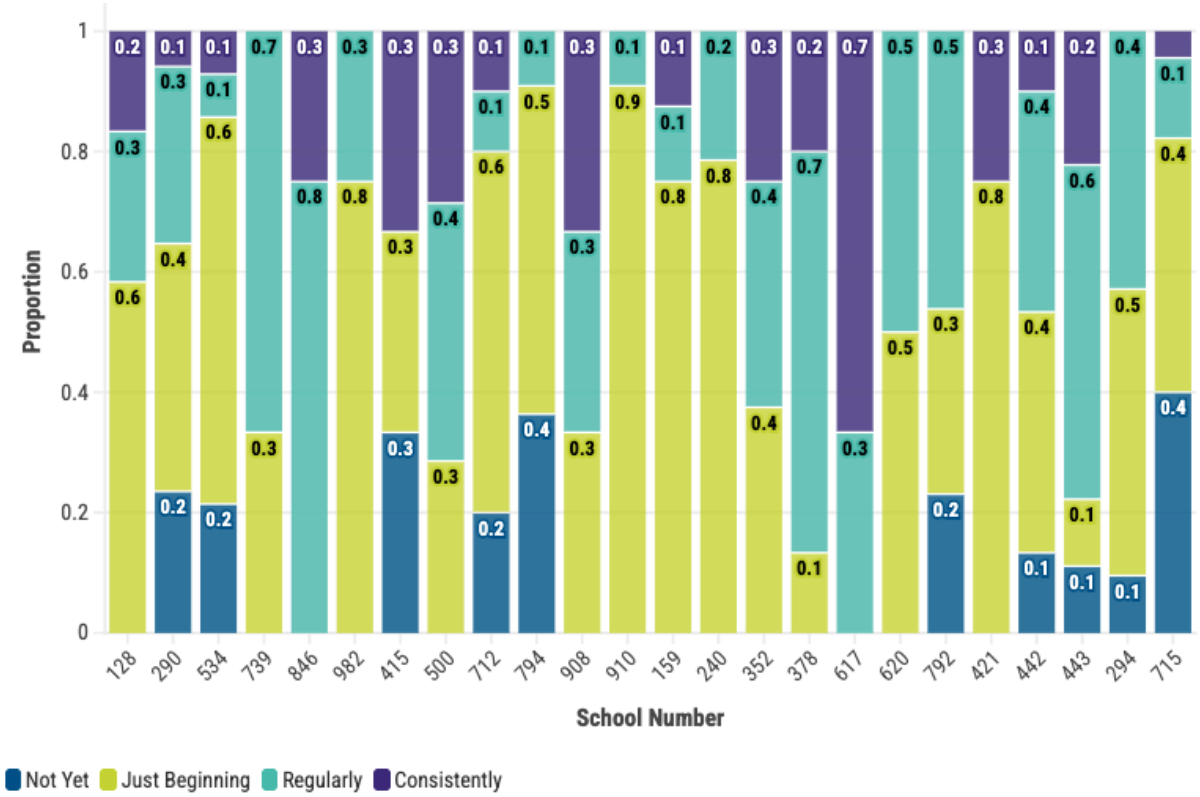
To measure quality and depth of implementation, we first describe teachers' and school leaders' self-reported overall implementation. We then describe their CRS MBL practices using the components of the mastery-based learning definition as our guiding framework.

Self-Reported Depth of Implementation

Near the end of the teacher survey, early in the cohort's second year of MBLC participation, we asked: how regularly are you implementing culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning (CRS MBL) strategies in your courses? The response options ranged from "I am not yet implementing any CRS MBL strategies in my classroom" to "I am consistently implementing CRS MBL strategies most or all of the time" (see Appendix A in MBLC Cohort 2 Year 2 Technical Report).

Among the 300 teachers who answered this question, 15% said they were not yet implementing CRS MBL strategies, 49% said they were just beginning to implement, 28% said they were regularly implementing, and 8% said they were consistently implementing CRS MBL strategies. Responses varied significantly by school, as shown in Figure 9, with some schools having significantly larger proportions of their teaching staff already using these strategies, and others being at the beginning of their journeys. Teacher-level analyses did not reveal any meaningful differences in implementation based on teachers' tenure, age, race, gender, or grade level taught.

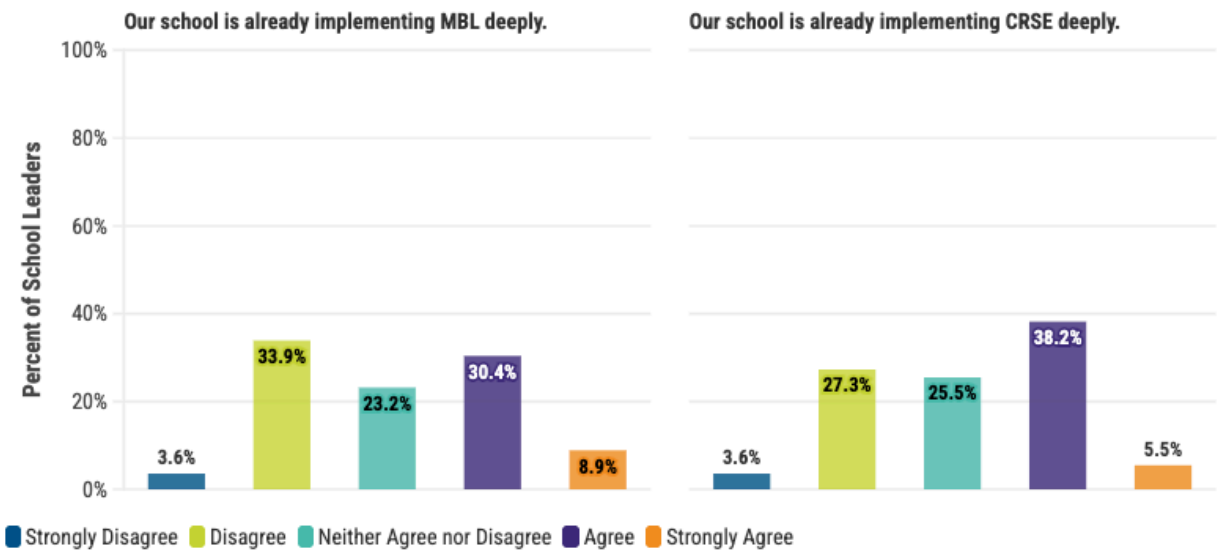
Figure 9: Teachers' self-reported implementation of CRS MBL practices by school



Source: MBLC Teacher Survey, October 2024 (n=300)

We asked school leaders similar questions, inviting them to share how much they agreed or disagreed that their school was already deeply implementing CRSE and MBL. As shown in Figure 10, 39% of school leaders agreed or strongly agreed that their school was already implementing **MBL** deeply. On the other hand, 44% of school leaders agreed or strongly agreed that their school was already implementing **CRSE** deeply.

Figure 10: School leaders' self-reported implementation of CRS MBL practices



Source: MBLC School Leader Survey, October 2024 (n=56)

It is noteworthy that **overall, school leaders believe their schools to be further along in their culturally responsive and sustaining educational journey than in their mastery-based learning journey.** In general, the fact that over a third of respondents said they were already implementing CRS MBL practices led us to ask whether the schools in Cohort 2 have a baseline of existing CRS MBL practices, or whether there was novice bias at play, with participants overestimating their schools' depth of implementation because of their unfamiliarity with CRS MBL. To address this question and explore how well their overall perceptions aligned with their self-reported practices, we turned our attention to survey items that measure the extent teachers were enacting certain CRS MBL practices in their courses.

In the sections that follow, we explore various aspects of CRS MBL implementation in detail, guided by the seven-part definition of competency-based education. Readers can navigate directly to the sub-section of interest using the following links:

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE)

> *"Culturally responsive-sustaining education is grounded in a cultural view of learning and human development in which multiple expressions of diversity (e.g., race, social class, gender identity, language, nationality, religion, disability) are recognized and regarded as assets for teaching and learning."*
>
> (Washington State Board of Education, n.d.)

In this section, we will examine current implementation practices regarding **culturally responsive-sustaining education**. We will organize our analysis into three sections based on Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billing's three pillars of culturally responsive education.

What is CRSE?

This framework draws inspiration from Gloria Ladson-Billings' 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:

- **Student Learning and Academic Success:** All learners are capable of academic success and must experience academic success.
- **Cultural Competence:** Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, the ability to understand their own and others' racial/cultural/social identities, and the ability to work effectively with others who are not like themselves.
- **Critical Consciousness:** Students must develop a critical/sociopolitical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (Ladson-Billings, 1995)

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.

The MBLC initiative's understanding of CRSE is guided by the New York State Department of Education's framework, which explains that culturally responsive and sustaining learning environments "affirm cultural identities; foster positive academic outcomes; develop students' abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; empower

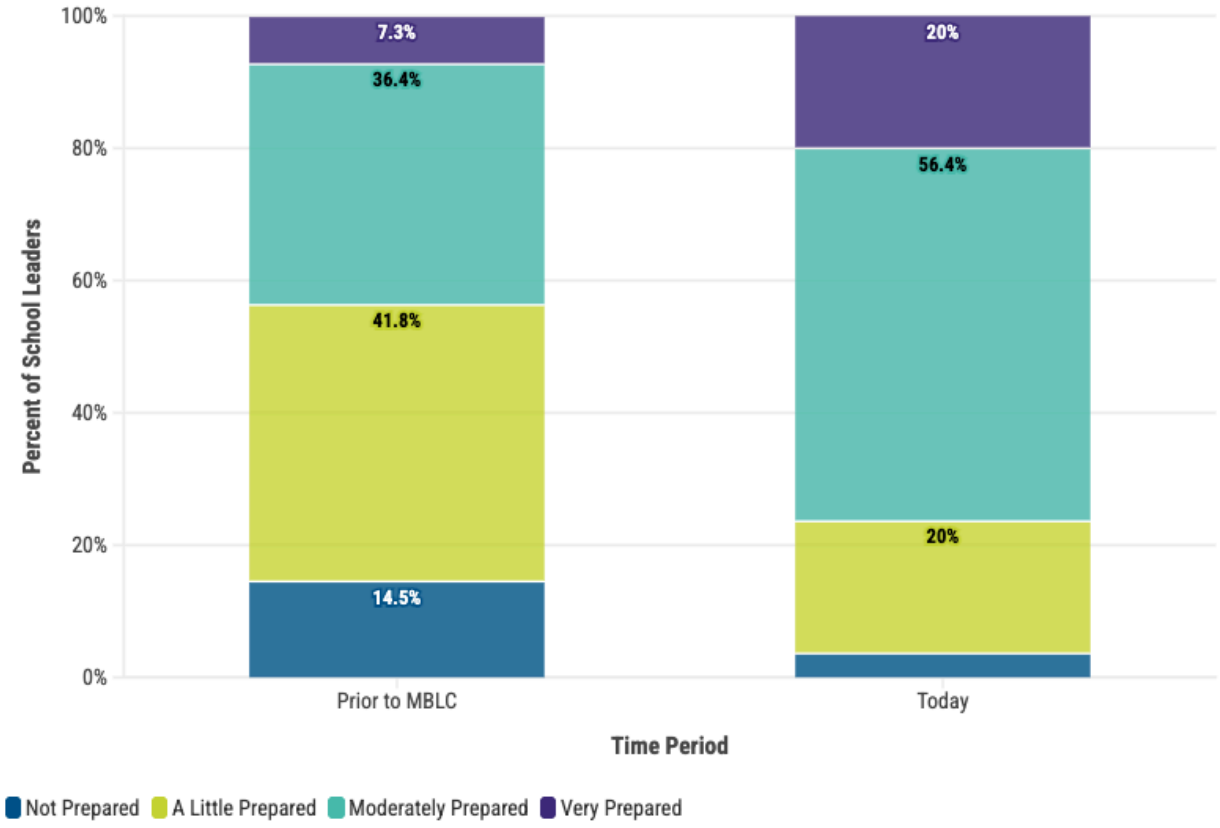
students as agents of social change; and contribute to individual student engagement, learning, growth, and achievement" (New York State Education Department, n.d., p. 6-7).

Although we are using the three pillars of culturally relevant education as an organizing framework for this section's analysis, we recognize the important distinction between culturally responsive/relevant and culturally responsive *and sustaining* education, and Washington's commitment to the latter.

CRSE Preparation and Buy-In

As shown in Figure 11, Cohort 2 school leaders reported **increasing preparedness to lead their school in implementing CRSE practices** since they joined the MBLC, with 76% of school leaders saying in the fall of their second year that they felt either "moderately prepared" or "very prepared" to lead that work at their schools.

Figure 11: School leaders' self-reported preparedness to lead CRSE implementation



Source: School leader survey (October 2024)

Buy-in among school staff and school communities across Cohort 2 also appears to be relatively high. A large majority of school leaders (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that most teachers and

instructional staff at their school were familiar with the principles of CRSE, and 56% either agreed or strongly agreed that families of their students support the school's intention to implement CRSE practices deeply. Cohort 2 teachers also expressed support for CRSE, with 75% of survey respondents saying that they either agreed or strongly agreed that implementing CRSE deeply would improve their school's climate and culture.

However, **when it comes to resources and support in implementation, responses were more varied**. Only 13% of teachers and 18% of school leaders strongly agreed that teachers had curriculum and materials that support culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy. Similarly, only 15% of teachers and 6% of school leaders strongly agreed that teachers have sufficient resources and support to deepen their cultural competence. Additionally, 25% of teachers said they strongly disagree that the teacher schedule includes sufficient time and resources to ensure the effective planning and delivery of CRSE.

In general, it seems that **there is general buy-in about the value of CRSE. Teachers were poised and eager to support the transition to deeper implementation, but needed the guidance.** This is expected, as schools were still early in their professional learning year. As one teacher explained,

> *"I haven't really received any instruction for, like, here's how you can make this part of your practice in your school."*
>
> - Alternative high school Spanish teacher

We will now explore what implementation of CRSE actually looks like in practice across Cohort 2 schools. Because this is such a large and multi-faceted topic, we have divided it into three additional subsections, based on Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings's three pillars: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

Student Academic Success

As Ladson-Billings writes, "culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students' academic needs, not merely make them 'feel good'" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). This means moving beyond simply increasing students' engagement and interest in learning–though that is a vital foundation–to addressing inequitable outcomes.

Most teachers and school leaders were hopeful that CRSE would improve their schools' ability to prepare students academically: 74% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that CRSE would improve both their school's ability to prepare students for successful futures and achieve equitable outcomes for historically marginalized groups. One school leader explained the connection as follows:

> *"Every time I talk about mastery-based learning, people say we've been talking about mastery-based learning for a long time. One of the big shifts in this work now with the State Board of Education is bringing in that culturally responsive piece. You can't have mastery-based without it. It's just vital to students that they're known, they're seen, and that we can tailor our education to and with them."*

- Vocational / career and technical high school principal

Some Cohort 2 schools already have systems in place to help address inequitable outcomes and access to academic opportunities: 65% of teachers and 75% of school leaders agreed that their school uses data to improve access to learning opportunities, and around the same–64% of teachers and 76% of school leaders–agreed that their school uses data to address inequitable student outcomes.

In the qualitative data, **the theme of supporting students in achieving academic success by incorporating their interests and culture came up frequently.** Many teachers emphasized the importance of building relationships and knowing their students as whole people to tailor instruction to their strengths, needs, and interests. Teachers described modifying course content and examples based on students' interests. In an example of how cultural competence and academic rigor can go hand-in-hand, one music teacher described how taking a culturally responsive approach in her course led to students developing significantly more skill in their instrument than she would have otherwise expected:

> *"When they came in, we had a couple kids that were like, I'm not gonna play the ukulele. I'm not gonna play Scarborough Fair music. They would, like, bring their electric guitars in for show-and-tell day. And they would play Crazy Train by Ozzy Osbourne on the ukulele. Even though I was like, you'll get your ribbon if you can play 'Skip to My Loo,' they're like, shredding over there."*
>
> - Alternative high school music teacher

Another common theme that emerged in this area was **the value of community-connected learning to enable deep and authentic culturally relevant experiences**. Multiple schools described meaningful learning experiences that emerged through collaborations with community partners, such as the local tribal community, a particular ethnic community, or organizations like a local Family Resource Center. One school leader described how one of those partnerships has supported valuable place-based learning:

> *"We have partnerships with tribal elders, and they have come to the school. We have participated in a program where we take our students over to another island, and they learned about the ancestral history of that place, and also the ecological history."*
>
> - Comprehensive K-12 school leader

Future studies should address the question of academic growth and high expectations through culturally responsive-sustaining education more deeply, to better understand how this is manifesting in practice.

Cultural Competence

The second pillar of CRSE, cultural competence, has a few component pieces: development of students' (and educators') own cultural competence; the ability to understand their own and others'

cultural, racial, and social identities; and the ability to work effectively across lines of difference. Cultural competence is the "ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than your own," which requires "developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, learning specific bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching" (Moule, 2012, p. 5). Given the differences in identity and background between Cohort 2 educators and students, and the diversity present in many Cohort 2 schools, this pillar is immensely important.

Educators shared many examples of ways they are **working to develop cultural competence and identity awareness–both their own and that of their students.** This included intentionally planned activities about identity, such as drawing identity maps and facilitating conversations between students about their backgrounds and home environments. One school mentioned that they have recently put together a few affinity groups for students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, facilitated by staff who share that racial or ethnic identity. That same school also began hosting multicultural celebrations that invited different ethnic communities represented at the school to come together and share about their heritage.

Many interviewees mentioned that their schoolwide professional development days were often on topics related to developing their own cultural competence and awareness about working effectively with diverse populations. For example, one school mentioned that their staff was doing a book study on the book *The Identity-Conscious Educator* by Liza Talusan. **However, individual teachers' own comfort and knowledge in this area varied dramatically.** One elementary teacher survey respondent, when asked how they would describe the benefits of CRSE, replied, "I don't have a good understanding of what this is–it's probably happening but I just don't know how to recognize it." Similarly, as one principal explained,

> *"There's a continuum of understanding and skills as it pertains to mastery-based learning and culturally-responsive education. And because we are a primarily White staff, a different level of care is needed to be used to introduce this work."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school principal

Once again, this points to the need for continued professional learning and growth cohort-wide, a theme which we will return to later.

The most common practices mentioned by teachers were related to increasing visible diversity and representation in instructional materials. This ranged from very simple low-hanging fruit, like changing the names of characters in a word problem to names that are more ethnically diverse; to auditing the examples used in a math class and supplementing the mentions of "old White men" with important mathematicians from other gender and racial backgrounds; to refreshing a classroom or school library to ensure diverse authorship and content. Educators were intentional about trying to increase representation of their varied student populations, but also recognized the importance of including the voices of populations who weren't enrolled at the school, in order to expose their students to perspectives and life experiences different than their own.

Despite the largely early-stage actions in this area, many respondents also emphasized **the importance of cultural competence for their students and the vital importance of developing awareness, empathy, and thoughtfulness** around issues of representation and equity. As one teacher explained in the survey,

> *"We are a very White community and it is vital that we teach White children the skills to understand, value, and respect other cultures and people that show up differently than they do so they are better equipped to not only be successful in an ever-growing multicultural society but also to be the next generation of anti-racists fighting for a better future for all."*
>
> - Comprehensive elementary school teacher

Critical Consciousness

Of the three pillars of CRSE, **practices related to critical consciousness – an ability to think critically about and challenge the status quo of the current social order – were the least frequently mentioned** among Cohort 2 schools.

However, a few examples did emerge of schools building these practices. At one school visit we learned about a history class that was rewriting its history textbook from different perspectives. Another school was developing courses in response to current events that they wanted students to be able to think critically about, whether because it was in the news or because it affected students personally. For example, one teacher described a course he developed for the 2024 fall term in preparation for the national presidential election:

> *"In the fall, we offered something that we called Civics. This was mainly because we were recognizing that students were not really prepared to understand what was happening with a presidential election. So we split up into three groups of mixed age, and then teachers collaborated before the school year, using some of the culturally responsive-sustaining materials that we got from MBLC to understand civics through the lens of power and privilege, and to try to understand, how can we be conscientious consumers of media?"*
>
> - Alternative high school civics teacher

The principal from that school made a connection between the civics course–and other classes built around current topics and students' interests and identity, like a similar course on immigration–and academic rigor:

> *"We're seeing really great results with [courses built around CRSE] because we're taking smaller groups of multi-age learners who have different perspectives, and then using curriculum that involves some academic skills–there's certainly some reading and writing–but also a high level of collaboration and some acting, which is a really interesting way to get kids to empathize with a variety of different perspectives and to think about the nuances of it, not just memorize the main points."*

- Alternative high school principal

This reinforces the importance of developing critical consciousness as part of student learning and academic growth. However, these examples were limited to just a few schools in the cohort.

Additional Themes Related to CRSE

One additional note of interest was the wide range in descriptions of CRSE among interviewees. This variability, as well as the lower levels of implementation, point to a need for continued professional learning and growth in this area across the cohort. Though there are a few bright spots, and schools who are learning deeply and thoughtfully into all three pillars of culturally responsive-sustaining education, **most schools seem to currently only be latching on to some of the "low-hanging fruit" of CRSE, with critical consciousness being the least commonly observed principle.**

Schools mentioned the self-assessment, which they did in year 1 of the MBLC, being helpful for identifying areas of growth and gaps. However, **many schools expressed a desire for more concrete resources and support in identifying next steps**, like this school leader:

> *"What does it look like to have an anti-racist space? Some people on my team didn't know what that meant. And so I don't think it would hurt to have some more resources or feedback around, like, how can you do a self-evaluation, and then how can you get, like, peer or coach feedback? Outside of materials and curriculum... it's really general for everything else. And so even, like, looking at your policies through a culturally responsive lens–like, what is that? What policies are you talking about? And even if we pull all of our things out, how are we evaluating them? Because if I don't have, like, a checklist or some kind of criteria, it's too open."*
>
> - Alternative high school principal

This desire for clear checklists and "how-to" guidelines came up consistently, and is a useful way to bridge theory and practice for educators for whom this is new work. However, CRSE is inherently local and responsive, and implementation is always changing based on the identities and experiences of the people in the room. A risk of shallow oversimplifications, and shortcutting the work of developing critical consciousness among educators, exists if CRSE practices are over-codified, as demonstrated in this quote from a teacher:

> *"We have a checklist that we use, and when we build new assessments we look at what we've built and say, 'Okay, do we have anything that's culturally bad or, you know, do we need to add more culture?'"*

The challenge for coaching and professional development in years to come will be how to provide the right balance of practical tools so that schools feel empowered to make concrete steps forward, while also deepening educators' own cultural competence and critical consciousness so that they can continually grow their own practices in CRSE.

Key Takeaways: Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education

Belief in the value of CRSE is generally high among teachers and school leaders, and 75% of school leaders feel at least moderately prepared to lead their school in CRSE work. However, very few schools are implementing deep culturally responsive-sustaining practices. Most schools in Cohort 2 are focused on increasing visible representation of and appreciation for diverse identities in academic work, often through the support of community partnerships. Deepening cultural competence among staff is a focus area of professional learning for many schools; many teachers expressed a desire for more overt coaching and support in this area. Very few schools have yet implemented practices designed to support students in developing critical consciousness.

Student Agency

"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."

(Washington State Legislature, 2025; Levine and Patrick, 2019)

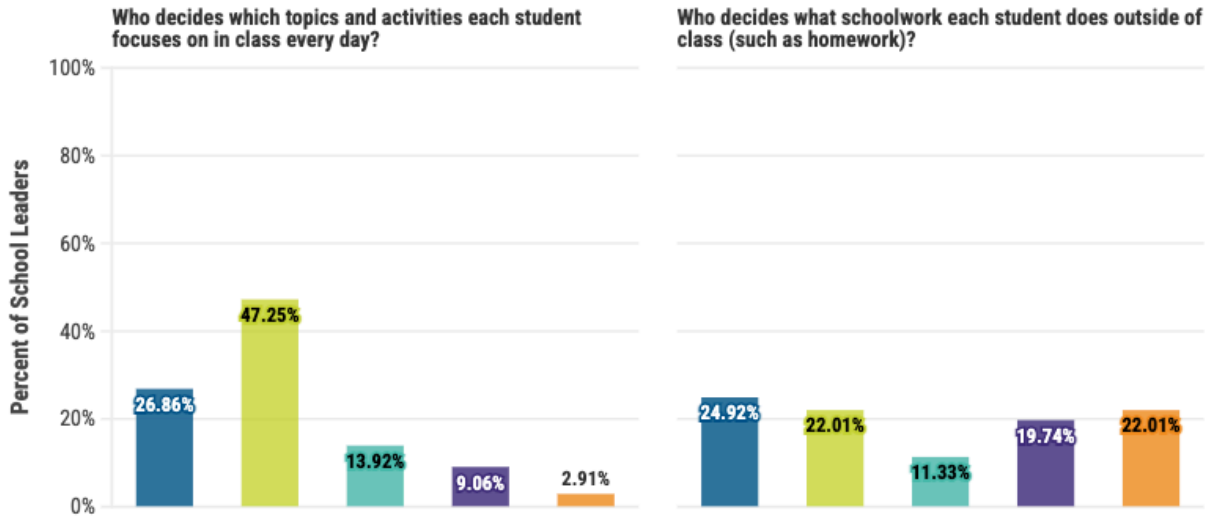
We will now turn our attention to current implementation of mastery-based learning practices across Cohort 2 schools. To organize ourselves, we will examine those practices through the seven elements of the MBL/CBE definition, beginning with **student agency.**

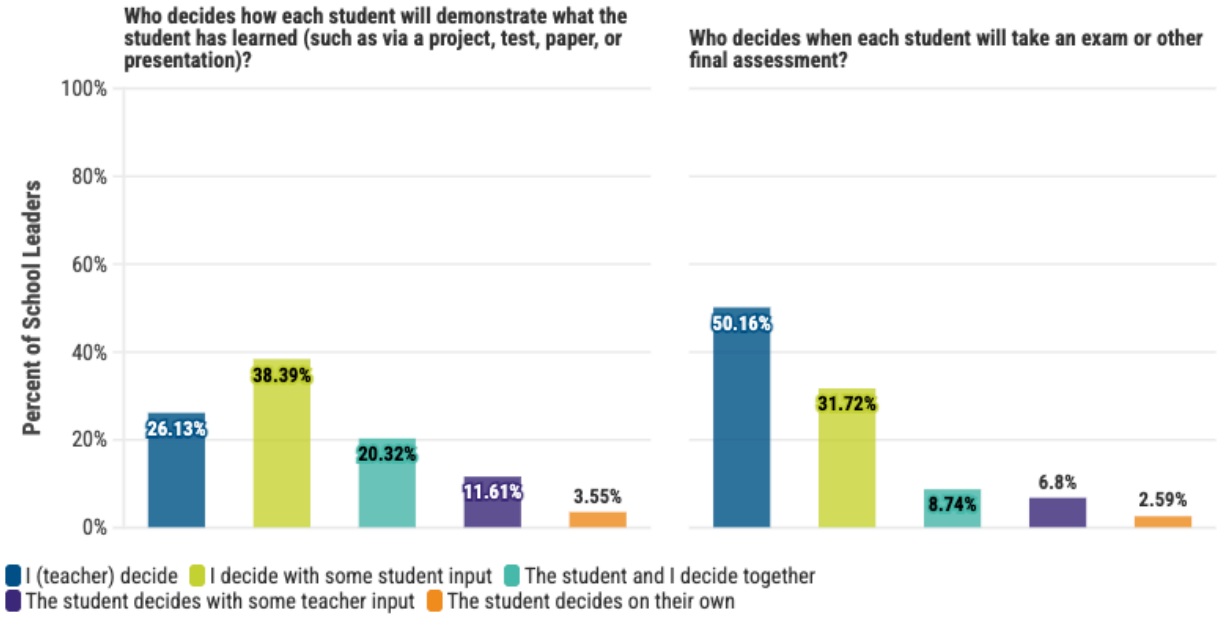
There are myriad practices that empower students with voice and choice. Across Cohort 2 schools, themes around student agency fell into two categories: agency in the classroom and agency outside the classroom.

Agency in the Classroom

Many interviewees made **connections to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles** that they are operationalizing in their classroom, and described ways they are designing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (CAST, 2024). However, this practice is not particularly common yet, with only 35% of teachers saying that students can choose different ways to learn the same material most or all of the time. In fact, as shown in Figure 12 below, **the vast majority of teachers in Cohort 2 schools still report controlling most of the daily choices around students' learning.**

Figure 12: Student agency in the classroom





Source: MBLC Teacher Survey, October 2024 (n=309)

Among teachers who are regularly offering choice to students, many emphasized how this approach leads to **deeper learning and engagement from students, and some even mentioned that it increases joy in the classroom**. As one teacher described,

> *"I let them choose their outputs. They could be research posters, comic strips, public service announcements–any way that they feel that they can express their understanding and true mastery of the information. Often there will be an 'other' option in my assignment, where I go, do you have an idea? Come talk to me. For me, it shows that they truly get it, because they are able to apply their understanding in a way that makes sense to them. I provide resources and notes, and they take those pieces and mold them in ways that really show their understanding. It just opens up their ability to to show their brilliance, and that innate capability that I believe that all children have."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school science teacher

Some teachers also mentioned that **providing student choice is a way they enact principles of culturally responsive-sustaining education.** By allowing students to explore topics that are connected to their identity, or demonstrate understanding of a concept in a way that's familiar to them, it helps to validate those expressions as valuable. This also helps to amplify diverse ways of knowing and to give students a chance to deepen their understanding of their own and others' cultural, racial, and social identities.

However, respondents also mentioned that providing students with choice in the classroom is not always easy. It **requires teachers to be clear about the learning outcomes**, and to clearly

communicate the goals so that students know where they have choice and where the boundaries to that choice are and what skills they are meant to be developing along the way. One teacher described her challenges in implementing student choice in the classroom and ideas she had gained from the MBLC visit to New York:

> *"We're giving kids opportunities to do things, but what we're not doing is scaffolding that. I had a group of kids that had to write a play based on* Much Ado about Nothing. *They wanted to do it on Minecraft–but they didn't know what they were doing. So I think we need some guidance systems. I saw that at one of the schools they had a checklist, and then it had at the bottom, how are you going to do it? So then the teachers consult with them: you need to have dialogue. Did you do that? Check. You need to have a storyboard. Did you do that? Check. So we have some work to do."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school special education teacher

Supporting student choice daily in the classroom requires teachers to make some shifts in classroom management practices, like spending more time in small group or one-on-one instruction and less time in full-class activities, which can be a challenging shift. One school leader described it as "more work, but the right work." As one teacher who is implementing high levels of student choice and personalization in his classroom explained,

> *"I love what I do because of how students respond.... I can't keep up with how engaged they are. Sometimes they're like, 'I've got this idea. I want to do this. I want to take it to this next level.' And I'm like, 'Okay, I only have so much I can do.' Sometimes their engagement is so impressive that I can't keep up. But I've also seen what it does when it's the other way–when they detach and don't buy in–so I think it's amazing."*
>
> - Vocational / career and technical high school business and math teacher

Agency Beyond the C lassroom

Student academic choice manifests at many Cohort 2 schools in **many different ways throughout the year, even if it doesn't show up in every classroom every day.** Some examples of high-impact practices shared by Cohort 2 schools include end-of-term exhibitions, portfolios where students get to select their best work to present for grading, community service-learning projects, annual student-led conferences, and passion projects. One principal described her school's annual passion project like this:

> *"We take a span of time in the spring where the scholars get to choose a project that's important to them and also involves a community. They work with their mentor teacher to flesh that out, developing executive functioning skills, setting goals... and then executing it, and then presenting that project to their parents at an evening exhibition night. One scholar organized a diaper drive at the grocery stores, and one scholar put on a soccer tournament, and one scholar crafted and sold things at our event–we did a vendor fair last year. So it's a big, joyful day."*

- Alternative middle and high school principal

Many Cohort 2 schools are also supporting increased student agency outside of the classroom through increasing student voice in school culture and policy decisions. Examples of this included the following:

- Developing a student equity team to review student data, identify possible inequitable practices, and advise on solutions;
- Inviting students to plan activities for schoolwide assemblies and designated social-emotional learning periods; and
- Placing students on committees building new school policies around topics like cell phone use.

As in the classroom examples, these **"non-academic" student voice initiatives also take scaffolding** – not just supporting students in identifying next steps, identifying boundaries, and learning about how to make and implement school-wide decisions, but also in helping to unlearn a "compliance mindset" and build their sense of agency and ownership. And like with the classroom examples, they also require some shifting of adult mindsets. As one principal described,

> *"This is for the students and by the students. Being more student-centered has been a big shift in our culture. We already were doing great with building relationships; students knew they were cared about. But now, bringing them into the design of units has been a cultural shift in classrooms, but also school-wide. More and more student voice is at the table."*
>
> - Vocational / career and technical high school principal

Key Takeaways: Student Agency

Most Cohort 2 teachers still control students' daily classroom activities. Changing this norm requires a shift in classroom management practices, clarity around student learning outcomes, and a mindset shift for teachers from "instructor" to "facilitator." It also requires students to move away from a compliance mindset to a more agentic one, which takes time. Some schools gave examples of ways they are developing those mindsets and practices, such as passion projects or by involving students in more school decision-making.

Essential Competencies

> *"Rigorous, common expectations for learning, including knowledge, skills, and dispositions, are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable."*
>
> (Washington State Legislature, 2025; Levine and Patrick, 2019)

In this section, we will examine current implementation practices regarding **essential competencies**.

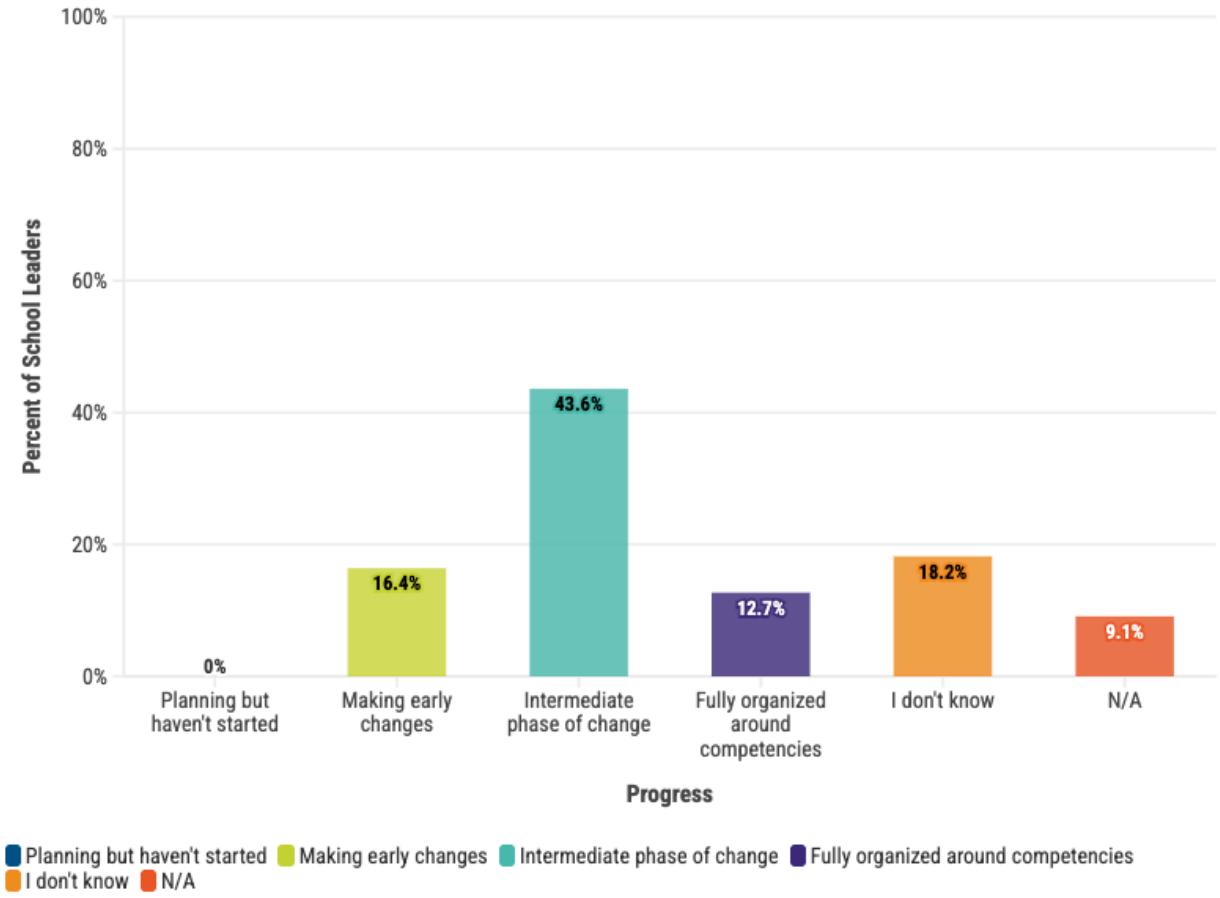
What are essential competencies, and how do they differ from standards?

Typically, schools will work towards clarity on student learning outcomes either by focusing on grade-level, discipline-specific standards or by developing interdisciplinary, multi-level competencies (Learner-Centered Collaborative, n.d.). The difference between standards and competencies is primarily about scale: "Competencies are larger grain size compared to standards, and are transferable across multiple domains, supporting relevancy and use into the future" (McClennen and Midles, 2023). However, many learning communities blend the two, or use standards as a jumping-off point before developing larger cross-cutting competencies.

Beyond the distinction between competencies and standards, the spirit of this principle is about clarity. Schools that are enacting this principle make sure that learning outcomes–whether discipline-specific or cross-cutting–are known to students, expressed in clear and accessible language, and are concrete, specific, and objective. This clarity around what students are meant to be learning is the foundation for redefining assessment.

In Cohort 2, **every school leader who responded to the survey said that their school is planning to shift towards using competencies**, and many are already working on it even at this early stage, as shown in Figure 13 below. In fact, 18% of school leaders said that their school is already fully organized around competencies, while the vast majority said they are either in the planning phase (16%) or somewhere in the change process (56%). A small percentage (9%) of school leader survey respondents were not sure what their school was at in this process, but no school leader survey respondents said that their school was **not** planning to organize learning around competencies.

Figure 13: School progress towards organizing learning around competencies



Source: School leader survey (October 2024), n=55

Yet although schools report that they are working towards organizing around competencies, **there is room for growth at many schools around sharing learning outcomes, expectations, and progress clearly with students**: only 32% of school leaders said that students "most of the time" or "always" receive a list of learning outcomes that they must meet to pass and get credit, and 36% said that students can "most of the time" or "always" track their level of progress on any learning outcome at any time. However, there is also significant room for growth here, with almost half (49%) of school leaders responding that students "never" or "rarely" can track their own level of progress on learning outcomes, and more than half (56%) replying that families "never" or "rarely" can track their student's progress.

Although cohort-wide implementation of essential competencies is still in its early stages, a few useful lessons emerged from schools that are already further along in this area. For example, one teacher from a school that is fully organized around competencies explained how they work in practice as a tool for assessment and reflection with students:

"There are six competency areas, and then there's all these indicators [at different progression levels from 1 to 5]. When I first looked at these I was like, oh wow, most adults are not at a level five on most of these! But we're looking for progress. Many ninth graders in their first trimester will not be meeting any of the competencies. Throughout the trimester, I am entering evidence of these competencies, so it's an ongoing evaluative tool. We also sit down with students to say, 'Okay, here's where I think you are. Where do you think you are?' We have some tools that we played with where students can say, 'Hey, I'm taking, you know, welding class. Here's the competencies I think I'm meeting in that class.' I think we're moving towards, like, 'Hey, here's what's important for you to be a healthy human being. That's why these competencies are here. How are you going to work towards those things?'"

- High school civics teacher and special education case manager

In another school, which is currently in the process of organizing learning around competencies, the school leader described the process of building out those competencies across the building, emphasizing the interaction between competencies and standards, as well as the iterative process of figuring out how to assess and measure competency development:

"They're fairly generic and part of our Portrait of a Graduate–like, what do we want students to be able to do really well when they leave? They're not course-specific, they are shared outcomes across the whole school. We call them 'shoutcomes,' which is really corny. Then the shoutcomes have targets that are more specific to the content. The targets are based on the learning standards from the state. We looked at: where do our students struggle in our state assessments? Where are they doing really well? What do we think is most important to prioritize? So then we looked at those standards and figured out how they might align to our shoutcomes. And then each of the targets in the content-specific area has a built-out rubric, and they've aligned them [across grade levels]. Now we're doing some refining."

- Alternative high school principal

Key Takeaways: Essential Competencies

Every school in Cohort 2 plans to shift to competencies, and most are already working on doing so; a few schools have been fully competency-based since before they joined the MBLC. However, very few schools are yet ensuring that students and their families can transparently track their progress towards a set of clearly communicated learning outcomes. This highlights the need to strengthen foundational practices around ensuring teacher and learner clarity on learning outcomes before tackling the complex process of competency development.

Meaningful Assessment

> *"Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence."*
>
> (Washington State Legislature, 2025; Levine and Patrick, 2019)

In this section, we will examine current implementation practices regarding **meaningful assessment**. Given the breadth of this topic, we will examine Cohort 2 schools' current practices around meaningful assessment in four subsections as follows:

1. Student reflection and clarity about their learning
2. Relevance and personalization of assessments
3. Multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding
4. Grading practices and policies

What is meaningful assessment?

In a mastery-based learning system, assessment is a tool for learning, not just evaluation. Assessment for learning "provides students with low-stakes opportunities to practice and self-assess what they know throughout the learning cycle. Meaningful assessment also provides students and educators with feedback they can use to improve and continue learning" (Gagnon, 2022). This requires communicating student progress and learning in a way that is clear and emphasizes the formative nature of learning–which means that grading and reporting practices often look different in schools practicing meaningful assessment.

Additionally, meaningful assessment means providing students with various ways to show what they know and can do, and inviting them to apply their knowledge and skills in varied ways. Thus, meaningful assessment might look like replacing traditional pencil-and-paper multiple-choice tests with projects that let students make connections between school content and their lives outside of school in ways that are meaningful to them. It might also look like letting students choose the way they would prefer to demonstrate and apply their knowledge. Lastly, this principle creates space for students to have multiple opportunities to reflect, revise, and re-assess as part of the learning process, and ensures that students know what proficiency looks like through clear rubrics or examples.

Student Reflection and Clarity

There are many ways to support student reflection on their progress and clarity about their learning goals. In the teacher survey, we provided a list of possible ways they could support student reflection through formative assessment; these items are accessible in Appendix B of the MBLC

Cohort 2 Technical Report. Of this list, the most common practices to support student reflection were quick check-ins like exit tickets, students using teacher feedback to reflect on their progress towards a learning goal, and students taking practice quizzes to check their readiness for a summative assessment. **The less commonly reported reflection practices were those that did not involve a teacher, like self-assessment or peer assessment.**

Many teachers described ways they would **use their school's competencies to guide students through reflection on their learning.** For example, one teacher at an Open Doors school described sitting down with students one-on-one to look at their overall competency tracker to see what they had learned and what they still needed to learn. Then, with that big picture in mind, they would use rubrics with clear indicators to reflect on students' work on individual assessments and discuss what they had demonstrated and what they had yet to do. In a different school, the principal described a similar process, but in a group format:

> *"This year I worked with a group of students to come up with a protocol where we could have students calibrate their learning with one another. They look at the assessment frames and do metacognitive thinking about their growth, then share it with one another. We did this really fun activity where we had groups of students who had evidence of their learning with assessment frames, and we had other groups of students moving through these stations. They were having deep conversations about the different competency areas and what their own growth looked like. And that was really powerful. Those kinds of activities make sense to me so that we're talking about competency growth on a more regular basis but it doesn't feel compliance-based."*
>
> - Alternative high school principal

At a different school, the principal described the way she has been working with her teachers to help **ensure student clarity on the learning objectives they are working towards**, emphasizing the importance of student reflection for building student buy-in:

> *"When a teacher is rolling out a unit they'll be teaching for the next few months, my vision is that they talk about the overarching learning outcomes for the unit with 'I Can' statements, and that scholars would unpack those learning targets, maybe even reword them so that they own them, so they're* their *targets. They would say how they're going to approach their learning target. Then they would know, 'This is what I'm working on for this whole next month.' You know how you get kids to actually understand what they're learning? When they've gotten to put it into their own words."*
>
> - Alternative middle and high school principal

A related theme that came up frequently was **the value of a simplified rubric which emphasizes what proficiency looks like.** Developing a one-column rubric (or other similar concepts) was a commonly-cited entry point into changing assessment practices, and many educators mentioned how it helped increase student clarity around expectations. One principal described the reaction at her school as follows:

"One of my teachers started using it [a one-column rubric] and was like, this is amazing, because this is where I need them to be for proficiency. So the students looked at it and said, 'Well, if I want to be more than proficient, then I need to do blah, blah, blah.' So it evoked a level of creativity and a desire to exceed for some students. Because with a 4-point rubric, when you have those students that are okay with doing the bare-bones minimum, they'll look at the first column and think, 'I just need to get a one (1).' But a one isn't necessarily mastery. So when we started introducing this, it created a shift in the mindset: this is the only thing that I'll accept, and you will rework it until it gets here."

- Comprehensive high school principal

Relevance and Personalization

Another piece of the meaningful assessment puzzle is letting students choose how they will demonstrate and apply knowledge in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them. This can take many forms, ranging from a simple menu of options for summative assessments that gives students choice in how they display their knowledge, to crediting learning that happens outside of school when students can demonstrate how that learning has led them to mastery of a given competency or objective.

A theme that came up frequently in interviews with Cohort 2 teachers and school leaders was that **to provide authentic choice to students, teachers needed to be clear about what the purpose of the assessment was and what learning they were trying to measure.** This created guardrails around the choices available. As one principal described it, "We provide choice, but it's not 'choose anything'—it's choice within a structure." This theme echoes previous findings from the student agency section about the importance of teachers setting students up to succeed through clear communication of expectations. As another school leader put it,

"One of the things that we've had to work on is teacher clarity. Because we can't ask a student to just do a task, right? What is the task, and what is the task connected to? If the task is not connected to a standard, then it's just an activity. And if we're talking about ownership, what were the kids able to choose? It can be guided choice. But the activities they can select from, how do they tie back to the standards?"

- Comprehensive high school principal

One teacher explained how she enacted this in a former math classroom with this example:

"I was like, how am I going to assess my students who were not at all interested in math? So we ended up doing math rap. One student rapped about the Pythagorean Theorem, and it was one of the best experiences I've ever had. The rest of us are going crazy, you know, dancing. And I was just like, oh, she got it. She was spot on with everything that she talked about. And she showed me, 'I get it, I understand it,' but she showed me in a way that she enjoyed and that meant something to her. And so

however students show me that they've learned is okay. I give students guidelines, and then I always say, if you have another idea about what you might want to do, let's talk about it. Because I'm trying to get them to engage past the sit-and-get, just-feed-me-answers."

- Vocational and technical education high school math and science teacher

Across the cohort, however, providing students with choice in their assessment format is relatively rare. Only 23% of teacher survey respondents said that they offer students different options "most of the time" or "always," and 21% said that they "never" let students choose. However, the use of performance assessments and other complex and meaningful projects is more common cohort-wide, with 53% of teacher respondents saying that they provide these forms of assessment "most of the time" or "always" (compared to 42% of teacher respondents who said they use traditional tests "most of the time" or "always").

Multiple Opportunities to Demonstrate Understanding

A third component of meaningful assessment is providing students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding. Providing students with the opportunity to re-learn, revise, and re-take assessments is a recognition of students' humanity, and helps demonstrate grace to students who might simply have had a bad day – which is an important piece of creating a supportive school climate. In addition to asking students to demonstrate their mastery of a learning outcome multiple times helps to ensure that they truly have understood and retained the material – a single lucky attempt is not enough. In this way, multiple opportunities simultaneously creates a less stressful learning environment that is focused on growth and learning from feedback, while also enhancing rigor.

As one school leader described it,

"The thing that I think that has most significantly changed for our school because of our exposure with MBLC is that we're really teasing out the opportunity to retake something after some additional learning has been done. That seems so simple, but it is a really big distinction. You know that situation: I took your quiz and I bombed it, can I take it again? Sure, once you've showed me some practice or re-engaged with the content in a different way, or you feel like there's something you've done to better prepare yourself to take the quiz and have success. I don't want you to just bomb it again, right? And so it's really been developing an understanding in our educators about why retakes are allowed. You know, we've all had days where we wake up and you're not your best self. That is human. And so I think it highlights the human element, that students are humans. We're all learners, and sometimes we just need a retry."

- Comprehensive high school principal

Across the cohort, **school policies and preferences are strongly supportive of providing students with opportunities to retake assessments without penalty**: 79% of school leaders said this was

either encouraged or required when students failed a first attempt, and 72% of teachers surveyed said that they allow this most or all of the time. Similar cohort-wide support was observed for providing students with additional learning supports before reassessing, with 85% of school leaders saying this was encouraged or required, and 71% of teachers saying that they arranged additional learning supports for students at least some times.

A common theme that came up among both survey respondents and interviewees on this topic were **concerns that by providing multiple attempts, students might not work as hard to master content on the first attempt, that they would fail to learn important habits of work about time management and meeting deadlines, or that it could create an unfair burden on teachers to provide and grade many additional assessments.** As one teacher described,

> *"Our school has a policy on late work: you have to accept late work and you can't penalize students. It makes sense to me, because if you got 100% on something, but you turned it in two weeks late, that doesn't mean you didn't master this standard. But I think that it does counteract this idea of rigor, because we're allowing students to turn things in six months after we did it in class. And so then it's hard, because we've moved past it, and now you're picking it back up. It puts a lot of burden on teachers. Students will come up to me, 'Hi, I'm going to fail your class at the end of the semester. What can I do to fix it?' And then they give me this pile of work. Instead, what would be wonderful would be to say, 'Hey, you missed the first three months of work, but you're going to be able to show me this standard in the next three months. Let's not go back and re-do these first three months. Let's find where you are and go on from there instead.' So maybe we just haven't fully implemented this idea, because those hang-ups probably shouldn't be happening, but they are, because we're grading assignments. So it's like, if we're still grading assignments, students are going to be wanting to go back and do those assignments, and then I have to grade those assignments six months later."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school English teacher

This teacher's comments reinforce the importance of clarity around essential competencies and priority standards, as explored previously in this report. If students know what they are expected to learn, the particular assignment itself is not the goal–mastery of the learning objective is. However, recognizing assignments as formative "practice work" in service of a larger goal is harder to do when every assignment is still entered in the gradebook. As one school leader described it,

> *"If a student got an F but they passed all their tests, I talk to my staff about it. Are you looking through a lens of compliance or mastery? OK, the student didn't do the assignments every day, but they still demonstrated understanding on the test. Do they have enough information and knowledge to be able to move forward in their learning in the next class? Because not all kids find the daily work meaningful. When we look at students that are compliant, that is not simultaneous with ownership."*

- Comprehensive high school principal

A related challenge has to do with the development of student habits of success. Formative assessments provide meaningful opportunities for students to practice the content, self-manage their learning, and receive feedback, so teachers are rightfully concerned when students disengage from those skill development opportunities. As one educator leader described it:

> *"Other schools that we talked to, they said there are grading periods where kids can show evidence of learning. So we're still working out, like, do you accept late work, and what are the circumstances with which you can accept it? Because school is also about learning that there's deadlines in life. So are we assessing SEL skills, or are we assessing the standards, and at what point, are you doing both?"*
>
> - Alternative middle and high school principal

These themes point to the need for clarity around expectations and timelines for reassessment. It also points to the **need to develop school policies that create space for students to learn on different timelines, while also providing scaffolding and support for students to make forward progress and learn habits of success** like time management and feedback-seeking.

Grading Practices and Policies

In this sub-section, we explore what practices and policies Cohort 2 schools are currently implementing around grading.

Many schools in Cohort 2 were already engaged in work around standards-based grading through their district prior to MBLC membership. This has proven to be both a helpful starting point and sometimes a hindrance, as it meant that schools sometimes were limited by the pace of the rest of the district.

This year, **many schools have begun working on developing or refining common rubrics and proficiency scales**, often using a 1-point, 2-point, or 4-point scale. This has created some confusion among teachers, especially around how to handle missing work in the absence of a 0 or F. But these changes have also generated a lot of positive feedback about the ways in which this work has standardized grading across the school and opened up important conversations about measuring what matters. As one school leader put it,

> *"We want to make sure we have common practices across all content areas. It feels like kids have six different bosses, right? That's been really resonating with our student advisory group; they go, 'I don't get how I have a 38% and have a D in that class, and I have a 38% and have a B in another class.' That's problematic. And what story does that tell our kids or parents? School is hard enough; it should not be that confusing, you know?"*
>
> - Comprehensive high school principal

Table 7: Factors included in student grades

	Survey respondents who do ***not*** count this factor in student grades	
	Teachers	School leaders
Attendance	73%	68%
Participation	41%	43%
Deadlines	61%	49%
Formative assessments	19%	6%

Source: MBLC Teacher Survey, October 2024 (n=293-302, varies by question); MBLC School Leader Survey, October 2024 (n=48-50, varies by question). *Note: The "School leaders" column represents the percent of school leaders who said that their school policy does not allow teachers to include that factor in student grades.*

As shown in Table 7 above, many educators in Cohort 2 described that as a result of the professional learning they've experienced, both directly from MBLC-provided professional learning providers and through other resources like Joe Feldman's *Grading for Equity*, they are simply grading fewer things. As described above, **disconnecting student habits of success (e.g. attendance, punctuality, etc.) from grades, and no longer putting "practice" work in the gradebook, has been a common starting point for many schools**, as this educator describes:

> *"I try to grade less. Putting in a score or grading for compliance is something that I have had a big philosophical shift with. You know, am I putting in a score in the grade book just because they turned it in? So I grade less, but I assess more. Students are getting feedback all of the time, we're using reflection, we're having discussion, and they're taking that feedback and using it to go to the next step or go to the next level. I don't think I've had a student for the last semester ask me, like, 'Well, what do I need to get this score?' or, like, 'How many points is this worth?' I just don't really engage in those conversations anymore."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school math and business teacher

However, managing the more formative approach of mastery-based grading with requirements for standardized and regular communication about students' progress with parents, districts, and the state presents many logistical challenges. For example, 63% of school leader survey respondents said that student progress is still reported to families using traditional letter grades most of the time or always, and 61% said that student progress is most of the time or always reported to families by whether or not students have demonstrated mastery of specific learning outcomes. This overlap indicates that many Cohort 2 schools may have a foot in both worlds, trying to bridge more traditional and familiar methods of grade reporting with new ones. For example, some schools built their own systems to report learning to families in a more meaningful way, such as one elementary school that built a new report card but struggled with adapting their student

information system to that new report card format. Or as one teacher who has moved away from grading formative assessments explained:

> *"The thing that goes in the grade book is checkpoints, like, 'Hey, where are we at this point?' I try to have it be more based on feedback. But then, at some point, it does have to be turned into a number. I have the district expectation that my grades are updated every two weeks. I need to get communication out to families, this number that tells them how their student is doing. But does that support mastery-based learning? So having a system where you can give qualitative feedback to a student that would then communicate to the family, and understanding how that works, and having the bandwidth to figure out how to do that… it seems a little daunting, because even though I'm doing this reflective, standards-based approach in my classes, sitting down and articulating for 100 students takes time and energy. So that is a hurdle."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school math and business teacher

This teacher is not alone: many schools are **constrained by district requirements, and therefore find themselves trying to fit their building's mastery-based grading practices into a system that isn't built for it. This often results in extra work and data entry, or reducing the nuances of MBL grading into less authentic and complete numerical representations.** Many educators expressed frustration with their district's learning management systems as significant barriers to implementation in this area. The development of concrete systems for measuring, tracking, and reporting student learning in a mastery-based system takes time, and will continue to be an area for growth and refinement in the years to come.

Key Takeaways: Meaningful Assessment

Many Cohort 2 schools focused on this area of practice in year 2, working with their coaches to update and standardize grading policies and practices across their buildings or develop consistently-used rubrics. Many Cohort 2 schools had a foundation in rethinking assessment from previous initiatives around standards-based grading. Although performance assessments and summative projects are fairly common across the cohort (86% of teachers said they use them at least sometimes), offering students choice in their assessment format or when they will take a final assessment is still quite rare. While disconnecting student habits of success (e.g. time management, responsibility) from grades is a common starting point for many schools, teachers expressed many concerns about the potential downsides of this for both students' development of those habits and their own workloads. Other barriers to implementation in this area are logistical, including the challenges of using district and state reporting systems that do not align with mastery-based grading, or the difficulty of communicating nuanced feedback to families about students' progress using existing platforms.

Timely Differentiated Support

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

(Washington State Legislature, 2025; Levine and Patrick, 2019)

In this section, we will examine current implementation of **timely differentiated support** practices.

What is timely differentiated support?

Timely differentiated support is about meeting students where they are, maintaining clear expectations for proficiency, and monitoring students' pace and progress to ensure they receive the support they need to demonstrate proficiency. "When schools commit to ensuring that every student can succeed and recognize that students have different knowledge, skills, and life experiences, they quickly find that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Instead, schools need to be responsive, providing the right support at the right time." (Gagnon, 2022)

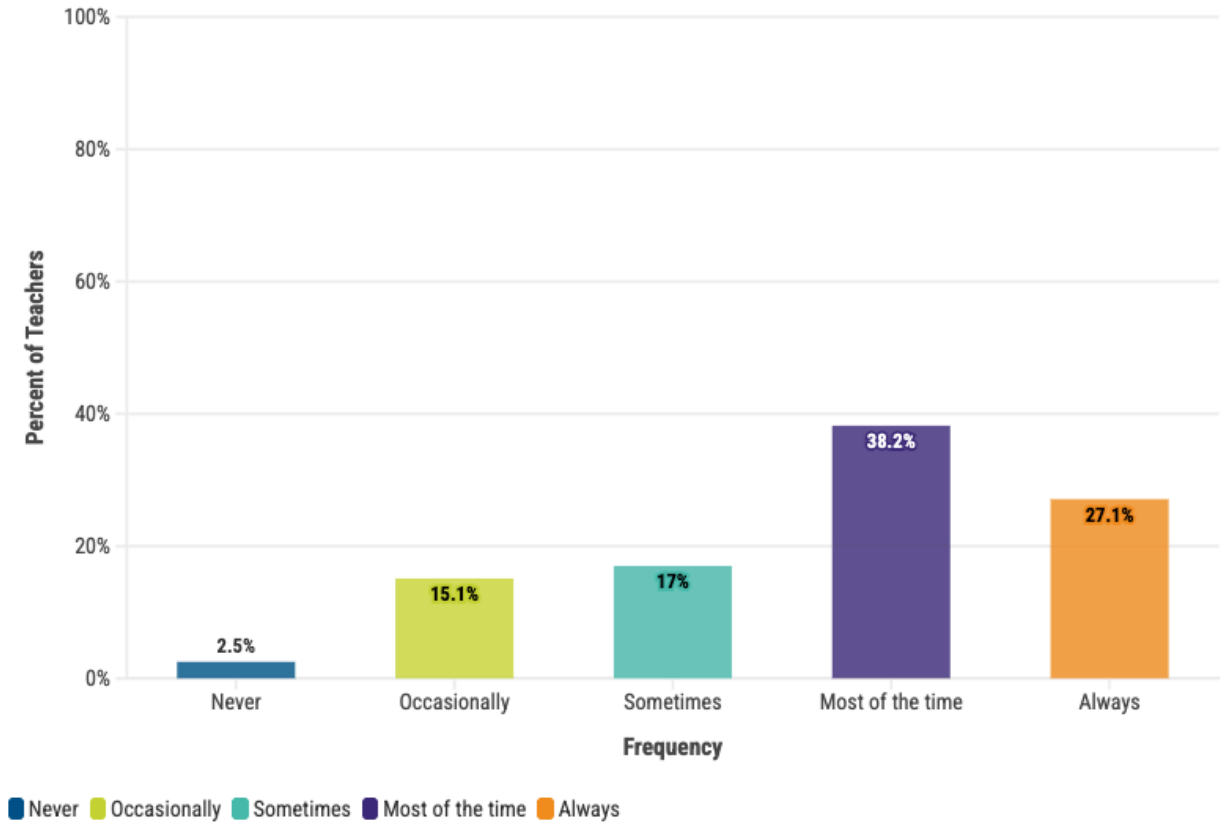
This principle does not mean lowering the rigor of instruction or expectations. On the contrary, meeting students where they are and providing the individualized support and scaffolding they need to reach high expectations is about educational equity.

There are many different instructional and structural practices that allow students to receive the support they need when they need it. This is a common practice in Cohort 2, with over 65% of teacher survey respondents agreeing that all students, regardless of achievement, receive personalized support all or most of the time, as shown in Figure 14 below.

Buy-in around the importance of differentiation and personalized support for all students came through clearly in the qualitative data from both survey respondents and interviewees. Some respondents pointed to UDL principles as helpful starting points for thinking about differentiation. As one teacher at an alternative high school put it,

> *"We have to consider that students come from different backgrounds and different cultures, from different abilities, interests and goals and hopes. To expect that a one-size-fits-all method is going to reach each individual characteristic for each individual student is silly. They need to be able to access the information in ways that are relevant to them. And I think that mastery-based learning is one of those things that can potentially, when done well, reach all of those individual students."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school science and math teacher

Figure 14: Frequency of personalized support provided for all students



Source: MBLC Teacher Survey, October 2024 (n=317)
Note: This item was "All students receive personalized support based on their individual learning needs, regardless of how well they are doing in school."

Many interviewees discussed the **benefits of personalized support for both struggling students and high-achieving students.** Teachers described providing one-on-one support to help students catch up who were missing foundational content; for example, one high school math teacher at an alternative school described how a student who had never attended school before and didn't even know how to write numbers was given intensive interventions for a year and now is in his standard pre-algebra class! Teachers also described ways they developed more challenging work to provide to students who were already demonstrating mastery of a certain topic to ensure that they remained challenged, and weren't able to just "skate along." For example, one school brought in a community member who worked as a computer programmer for a few hours per week to teach calculus to a student who was excelling in math, since their school did not offer a calculus course.

Not all timely differentiated support is individualized, however; many teachers described the importance of **being able to group students together to help provide tailored assistance and instruction to small groups of students**, like this high school science teacher at a comprehensive high school, who described her classroom as a highly tailored and differentiated place:

> *"For all of this structured content I have a modified version for students that are struggling, and then I have a more advanced version for students who are not. And this is part of what I think is the beauty of mastery-based learning: it differentiates instruction 100% of the time, every day. And so we do that here in the classroom. I have groups of students who are working at different places, at different levels, simultaneously."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school science teacher

However, when surveyed about some of the practices that help operationalize this principle, Cohort 2 teachers and school leaders responded with indications of significant variability across the cohort. For example, almost a third of teachers report that students are only "occasionally" working on different tasks in their classroom, and only a quarter say that this is happening "most of the time." Similarly, only 50% of teachers report "most of the time" or "always" meeting individually with students to discuss their progress, and school leaders report this happening even less often.

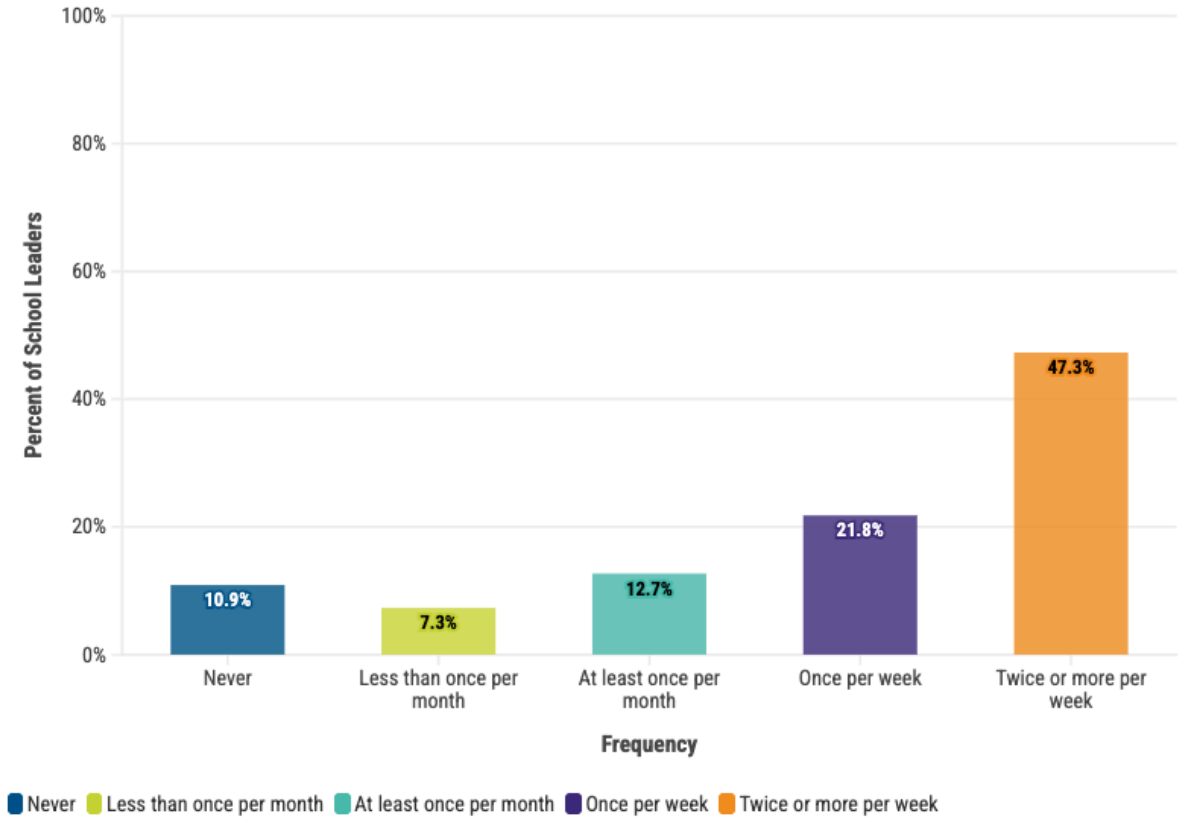
Another theme that emerged in the qualitative data was the importance of a **teacher mindset shift about their role – from a deliverer of content to a facilitator of student reflection.** Many teachers interviewed discussed the importance of meeting individually with students to identify what they know, what they need help with, and what they're working on. For example:

> *"Through reflection and guidance, the teacher is really there to facilitate their learning, rather than just being the person that starts class saying, 'Okay, this is what we're learning today. This is the entry ticket. Everybody write down the same thing.' It takes that structure out completely and says, Okay, where are* you *starting today? And how do we make it more meaningful and deeper?"*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school math and business teacher

Additional themes emerged in the qualitative data about **school structures that enable or hinder timely differentiated support, especially scheduling flexibility and class size.** Most Cohort 2 schools have built in significant flexibility in their schedule to provide students with personalized support, as shown in the responses on the school leader survey in Figure 15.

Scheduling flexibility encompasses two things: flexibility in students' and teachers' daily schedules, and flexibility in the school schedule overall. First, built-in time in the daily or weekly schedule for students to receive personalized support was common in Cohort 2 schools. Examples of this included four-day weeks with a fifth day of optional support time, daily flex periods with no classes scheduled, or half-day schedules with the other half day being more open for personalized instruction or out-of-classroom learning experiences.

Figure 15: Scheduled opportunities for personalized support



Source: MBLC School Leader Survey, October 2024 (n=55)
Note: This item was "How often does your school offer scheduled intervention/enrichment blocks where every student can receive personalized support from their teachers or other school personnel?"

Second, some schools described the value of being able to **shift courses taught throughout the year** to accommodate the evolving needs of the student body. This was particularly common at schools with shorter term lengths (e.g. quarters, trimesters, etc.), as described in this example:

> *"We rebuild our schedule every eight weeks based on who we have here. This year we expected to have more 10th graders than we did, so we rebuilt our schedule and moved more people to different grade levels to accommodate the students that did want to come. And that wouldn't be possible if we were stuck in a system where we had to have the schedule out and then couldn't make any changes, like at a comprehensive school, where they have a lot more strict rules about how many students that they can take based on their schedule, which is set in, like, June for the following year."*
>
> - Alternative high school principal

Many teachers also raised class sizes as an important condition that impacts their ability to provide personalized support. Overall, most teachers agreed that it was more challenging to enact

this principle in larger classrooms, simply because there are more students to personalize for. However, some teachers also pointed out that in larger classrooms, students are less likely to be "on their own," which enables teachers to use flexible groupings to support their learning. Teachers also mentioned the value of personalized educational technology in helping provide differentiated learning materials, although it certainly could not replace the role of a teacher in facilitating students' learning.

The final theme that emerged around timely differentiated support was related to the **equity implications.** Interviewees described the importance of differentiation and personalization for many groups of students who often struggle in school, including English Learners, students with disabilities, students missing foundational content from earlier grade levels, and students who have experienced trauma. One school leader emphasized the macro-level implications of providing differentiated support to help address gaps in foundational knowledge:

> *"In third grade, we go from learning to read to reading to learn. That's also when you take your first assessment. If you're not proficient at your first assessment, and you're not reading at grade level by third grade, then that gap starts to build. We also know that in the prison pipeline, people look at third grade assessments to determine how many future jail cells they're going to need.... So when I used to teach and I would have kids that were struggling, I would go back and bring those third grade concepts back. Because they had stopped at that point in learning."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school principal

As with other concepts throughout this report, Cohort 2 interviewees emphasized **the importance of personal relationships between teachers and students:**

> *"It really takes knowing each student individually and kind of where and how to push and where to give. So you know, it's about equity, not equality and fairness and the sameness. It's about equity."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school principal

Key Takeaways: Timely Differentiated Support

Most teachers in Cohort 2 agreed that all students receive support when they need it, and many emphasized the benefits of providing personalized support for both low- and high-achieving students, noting that this is a significant lever for educational equity. Teachers emphasized the need for personal relationships with their students, as well as the need for scheduling flexibility, to implement this principle well.

Personalized Pathways

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

(Washington State Legislature, 2025; Levine and Patrick, 2019)

In this section, we explore implementation of practices related to **personalized pathways** among Cohort 2 schools. This principle is interconnected with other principles explored elsewhere in the report. Specifically, this principle touches on student agency ("Student learn actively"), personalized learning experiences ("different pathways"), and responsive pacing ("varied pacing"). In this section of the report, we will focus only on the personalized learning experiences piece; student agency and responsive pacing are discussed elsewhere.

What are personalized learning experiences?

This refers to learning experiences that are tailored for individual students, "reflecting each student's unique needs, strengths, interests, goals, and pace. The order in which students master learning targets both within and across academic disciplines may vary.... Personalized learning experiences may include formal and informal learning opportunities both within and outside schools" (Levine and Patrick, 2019, p. 5).

"Anytime, Anywhere" Learning

"Anytime, anywhere" learning refers to learning that happens outside of the school setting. This means that students can demonstrate mastery of competencies through experiences like internships or community experiences and receive academic credit accordingly.

Having students apply their learning in practical ways like research projects is fairly common. But crediting students for demonstrating mastery of learning through activities they do outside of school is still quite rare, with 55% of teachers saying they "never" or "rarely" do so. However, when asked the same question, 39% of school leaders responded that students can earn school credit for demonstrating mastery of learning outcomes through activities they do outside of school either "most of the time" or "always." **This represents a gap between what school policy permits and what teachers actually do in class.**

The gap between policy and practice is illustrated in an example that one school leader shared during an interview, as she explained a situation where they were trying to provide PE credit to a student who played tennis at a high level outside of school. Although the school was on board and the policy permitted letting her sports activities count for PE credit, the PE teacher was struggling to figure out how to collect and assess evidence of her mastery in a rigorous but also reasonable way, citing challenges like not being able to receive videos of the student playing in competition.

This example, while only anecdotal, illuminates the logistical challenges that often stand in the way of turning permissive policies into procedures and practice.

To support this work, **multiple schools in Cohort 2 described ways they are building structures that support personalized out-of-class learning experiences for their students**, such as "leaving to learn" days, community-based projects, clubs focused on particular interests, work-based learning opportunities, or internships. While building the assessment systems to accompany these experiences can be challenging, and this sort of out-of-classroom learning takes a lot of logistical coordination, schools that are doing it universally spoke positively of the experience.

Interviewees also mentioned equity implications of this element of MBL, emphasizing the benefits of personalized pathways particularly for students in challenging situations. For example, one teacher talked about being able to assess proficiency in skills like communication and learning to learn for emancipated students who were living independently and navigating how to find and rent their own apartment. At another school, a principal described how providing flexible pathways for students through their school's curriculum helps ensure that transient students aren't put at a disadvantage:

> *"We have a highly mobile population, and sometimes their records just don't come with them… so to get a student started, we just start them with, like, here's where you should be [based on your age cohort], and then we're gonna assess if you need additional support to get there. If they pass the next higher-level class, we'll go back and give them a proficiency credit in the lower one. So like, if you pass senior English, we're not going to make you go take ninth grade English. We're going to just give you a pass so that you can move on."*
>
> - Alternative high school principal

Personalization of In-School Learning

Personalized pathways are not limited to out-of-school experiences; this principle can also be enacted through the personalization of in-school learning experiences. On this topic, a number of important themes also emerged in the qualitative data.

For teachers to facilitate learning in a personalized classroom requires a shift in the teacher's role and classroom management practices. In a highly personalized classroom, students might be working on mastering learning outcomes in different ways and at different speeds. Approximately a third of teachers in Cohort 2 said that students are doing different things in their classroom "never" or only "occasionally," a third said this was the case "sometimes," and about a third said this was the case "most of the time" or "always." Teachers expressed some concerns about the classroom management implications of this approach, as exemplified by this comment in the teacher survey:

> *"Very overwhelmed with content that we are supposed to deliver, and how in the world I will be able to have kids doing all different things and be able to manage it all, or evaluate progress."*

- Comprehensive elementary school teacher

This concern points back to a theme that has emerged across various implementation practices, about **the central importance of a clear focus on the learning objectives over the methods or activities**. One school leader described how this focus allowed a teacher in his building to make significant shifts in his classroom practice:

> *"A couple years ago, you might have walked into our manufacturing classroom and students had to build the same thing, all of them this certain way. And now, through a lot of conversations, that teacher is like, 'What are the skills I'm teaching? What do I want them to learn? Can they learn those skills and create something of their choice?' He's done a lot of work to create those kinds of options and choices for students. Here are the skills, here's the theme. Here's one way you can do it, but if you want to do it a different way, you can."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school principal

Some schools have developed in-class passion projects that allow students to connect their interests and learning to the community in meaningful ways. One teacher described the ways in which this community-connected learning is intended to benefit both students and the community itself:

> *"I've developed a capstone project that students start their junior year. The outcome is really connected to our competency of social reasoning. For two years, students are working towards that outcome, starting with their interests, and then understanding how this connects to making the world a better place. Who are going to be the users of this thing that you're making? What about the community that you're working within? Then engaging with those different stakeholders in the community. In the past, it was much more, kind of, students are developing a project. But it didn't necessarily have community benefit."*
>
> - Alternative high school civics teacher

Some respondents also gave examples of ways in which they tailored content to the entire classroom, not each individual student, like a middle and high school music teacher who described adapting her course materials to use examples from rock and metal once she found out that a certain classroom loved those genres. Examples like this represent positive steps that move schools forward on the continuum of implementation towards full personalization of student learning pathways.

To enable students and teachers to move towards more flexible and personalized pathways that reflect students' unique needs, strengths, interests, goals, and pace, many schools utilize individualized learning plans, goal-setting, and self-reflection by students, frequently supported by advisors. **To do this effectively, interviewees emphasized the importance of building that "muscle" of reflection and identifying goals–among both students and teachers.** One school

leader described the way she is working to build that muscle this year, in hopes of eventually developing a "Friday seminar" model like the one her team saw in action on a visit to another school:

> *"We have to train students on the expectations of seminars, and we also have to hold each other accountable for the work that goes into seminars. My building team said, 'We really want to do this,' and I'm like, I get it. But before I dedicate an entire Friday to student choice, I need to understand what it's going to look like. We have to have a system. I need students to understand the expectations. So we started with Thursdays, during advisory, is club day. We chose something small to start training students and staff on the expectations, and it allowed teachers the opportunity to introduce their passions and connect with students on a different level.... So every Thursday they go to a club during advisory. Kids have to sign up because, again, it's accountability. It's trust. Part of that is building the system. And so that has really grown and strengthened over the course of the school year."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school principal

Key Takeaways: Personalized Pathways

In terms of providing school credit for "anytime, anywhere learning," area, there is a gap between what most Cohort 2 schools' policies permit and what teachers actually do. This is often due to logistical challenges; however, many schools are intentionally building structures that will help reduce those challenges, such as weekly "leaving to learn" days, internships, and community-based projects. However, in the classroom only 30% of teachers say that students in their classes are working on different things on any given day, indicating the need for a shift in classroom management practices to fully realize this principle.

Responsive Pacing

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

(Washington State Legislature, 2025; Levine and Patrick, 2019)

In this section, we will examine current implementation practices regarding **responsive pacing**, also known as mastery-based progression.

What is responsive pacing?

Responsive pacing means that students can move on when ready – whether that's fully move on to a new course mid-year, or move on to deeper and more advanced content once they've mastered the current work. As Levine and Patrick write, "Rather than coupling the standards with specific ages or grade levels, they are based on learning progressions that provide guidance to students within their zone of proximal development." To support this, teachers, students, and parents must have data indicating the level of progress on learning goals to monitor student progress and know what is next.

Responsive pacing is closely related to student agency, timely differentiated support, and personal pathways. Students navigate different paths at different speeds, all in the same direction: towards mastery of rigorous learning expectations. In other words, "students are asked to manage their own learning progression with some guidance from their teachers but without explicit instruction on specific content occurring at a set pace or timeline" (Sutherland et al., 2023).

Previous research has shown that responsive pacing is the least likely part of mastery-based learning to be implemented (e.g. Evans et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2023). This is often because of the "grammar of schooling" – that is, organizational structures like "dividing time and space, classifying students, allocating them to classrooms, and splitting knowledge into subjects" (Tyack and Tobin, 1994, p. 454), as well as pressure to keep students connected to their age group peers.

In most Cohort 2 schools, responsive pacing is not yet happening schoolwide. One principal acknowledged that this is a part of CRS MBL they haven't yet explored in much depth:

> *"It's been on the horizon, and we've had discussions about it. I think there's the recognition that we have students that are going to be at all different levels, and so it needs to be acceptable and accessible for students to take a little bit more time or*

move forward as their needs arise. We're trying to figure out how to do it in a comprehensive high school where it's so traditional and kind of expected."

- Comprehensive high school principal

One notable exception in this area seems to be found at the Open Doors schools in Cohort 2. Open Doors is a Washington state re-engagement system that provides education and services to "overage and under-credentialed" young people, who have dropped out of school or are not expected to graduate from high school by age 21 (OSPI, n.d.). At these highly personalized schools, there is no built-in expectation of a shared cohort or set milestones, meaning that students are able to progress through the work needed to reach graduation entirely at their own pace. As one Open Doors teacher described it,

"We focus on learning. In our program, you're not done until you have learned it, and you may need to take a pause and come back. Before, in comprehensive schools, it was like, 'Well, the unit's over, so whether you learned it or not, we're going ahead.' Here we offer feedback, not grades. So students are participating in learning and practice and then eventually showing us evidence of their learning, but our feedback is either 'you clearly have learned it' or 'you haven't learned what you need to learn yet. Let's go back and do it some more.' It's okay if it takes you more than one try; that's kind of the expectation. They use this [tracker], and when we conference, we use this to say, 'You have done this many and it's taken you this long.' And when they meet or exceed a competency, then we convert that into a credit. It could count for certain classes; that's how we fill out their transcript. They're all working on different things at different times. Somebody may finish something on Monday, and somebody else finishes something on Friday, and somebody else finishes something three weeks later. As they finish, then we're transcripting it."

- *High school Open Doors English teacher*

Beyond these particular schools, which have a different structure than most other schools in the cohort, there are certainly many other promising signs of movement towards responsive pacing – for example, 55% of teacher respondents said that students "most of the time" or "always" can move through course material more slowly than other students without penalty. **However, on average, responsive pacing practices seem primarily limited to the speed at which students move through content *within* a course, not *across* courses.** For example, only 2 school leaders (4% of survey respondents) said that it is "always" true that students are placed in classes based on the level of mastery they have demonstrated, not based on their age or grade level.

Some teachers shared examples of ways in which students are able to progress through course content faster or slower, often with the aid of instructional technology. For example, a teacher at one alternative high school shared this example:

"I've got some students in Spanish 2 that have little bits of experience here and there in other Spanish classes, but they didn't pass. [So in my class they're] like, 'Hey, I

already know this.' Okay, well, think of a cool way that you can show me! And then that student gets to move on.... We use an online learning program for skills practice in Spanish. So it's really easy for me to just go by their desk with a little sticky note, like, 'Here's your code, we're gonna move you on the stem-changing verbs. Go for it.' So that part is really cool; I don't have kids sitting around like, 'Hey, when do I get to jump through this hoop?'"

- Alternative high school Spanish teacher

However, most of the qualitative themes that emerged around responsive pacing highlighted challenges, or ways in which the work around mastery-based progression is tied to other concepts that schools want to nail down first. As with meaningful assessment, **the most common theme that came up here was around deadlines, and a concern that responsive pacing would result in students procrastinating and dumping huge volumes of work on teachers at certain times.** As one teacher explained,

"I guess it feels like it takes away the value of participating. Because they know they can just do it later, they're going to procrastinate on it. I tried student-paced, but in my experience, my classes all opted for 'I will do this the day before it's due' no matter how many interventions I tried to put in place. Some students obviously didn't do that, but a good majority. And so then they come in at the end and want to go back and do this work, but they're not really participating in a meaningful way because we're not doing it as a class anymore. They like a checklist. It's hard to continue to progress our curriculum as a class when it's really not an accurate assessment of where the class is at, because they're going to come to me right before semester ends and want to give me a pile of assignments instead of, you know, going with us through the process."

- Comprehensive high school English teacher

This example illustrates both a few common misconceptions about responsive pacing, and the way in which school structures can hinder implementation of this principle. First, a semester deadline does create a huge flurry of activity and present a real challenge for teachers if sufficient structures are not put in place to help manage student pacing throughout the semester. **Responsive pacing does not mean the absence of pacing guides.** As Levine and Patrick write in their field-defining work, "Each student's pace of progress matters, with schools actively monitoring progress and providing more instruction and support if students are not on a trajectory" (Levine and Patrick, 2019, p. 5). To borrow the analogy used by another educator on this topic, "Flexible pacing should be viewed as a team mentality where the student and teacher are working together (pacer + runner) to determine the appropriate learning schedule (pace) and structure (choice). All students are running the same or similar race, but their checkpoint timeline and strategy will be different" (Wright, 2020).

Second, echoing a theme that has been raised throughout this report: **responsive pacing is hindered by a lack of clarity on learning outcomes.** If students are going back to complete work

that was designed to be formative, instead of using that work to practice skills that ultimately are displayed in a summative demonstration of mastery, that is an indication of a compliance or checklist mentality. As Levine and Patrick warn, "Flexible pacing is one element of the instructional model, but a competency-based education system has many other elements. In some settings, this mistaken belief [that MBL is simply about students advancing at their own pace] has led to a checklist mentality in which students rush through low-challenge, disconnected activities and assessments that are seen as fulfilling a list of academic standards. Competency-based education, in contrast, emphasizes deeper, contextualized, and interconnected learning and diverse assessments that include performance-based demonstrations of mastery" (Levine and Patrick, 2019, p. 7).

Key Takeaways: Responsive Pacing

Although some teachers in Cohort 2 allow students to move through course content at their own speed, allowing students to move on to new courses when ready is very rare. It makes sense that responsive pacing is a growth area for Cohort 2, as these schools are early on their implementation journey of CRS MBL, and doing this element well requires shifting many other elements of how school functions. Recommendations to increase the quality and depth of implementation in this area, therefore, take a few forms:

1. Assess what school structures–such as course schedules and term length–might hinder teachers' and students' ability to allow students to move through their learning journey with flexibility.
2. Build in supports to ensure visibility into students' progress. Flexible pacing does not mean that there are no checkpoints, or that you cannot also teach students about deadlines. In fact, it requires increased clarity for all parties about where a student is on their learning journey, what they've already accomplished, and what they have left to learn. Building out essential competencies and learning progressions, and developing ways to assess and track students' growth, are key foundational pieces to enabling mastery-based progression.
3. Address misconceptions about mastery-based progression, and find low-hanging fruit when possible, such as allowing students to move at their own pace through course content.

Equity

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

(Washington State Legislature, 2025; Levine and Patrick, 2019)

We now turn our attention to the final piece of the mastery-based learning definition to examine its implementation across Cohort 2 schools: equity.

What is educational equity?

Educational equity means that each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential. Working towards equity in schools involves:

- Ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants in our educational system, removing the predictability of success or failures that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor;
- Interrupting inequitable practices, examining biases, and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children; and
- Discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents and interests that every human possesses. *(National Equity Project, n.d.)*

As shown in the illustration of the seven elements of CBE/MBL above, equity is not a practice. Instead, it is both an *approach* and an *outcome*. Equity should be "infused into the culture, systems, and pedagogy of a learning environment to produce equitable learning outcomes for each learner" (Gagnon, 2024).

Educational equity is grounded in an assets-based approach, and a belief that all students are capable learning at high levels, that they deserve to be supported and have barriers removed so they can reach those high levels of learning, and that educators should intentionally identify and challenge imbalances of privilege and representation so that all students are seen, known, supported, and celebrated. Therefore, equity is woven into all of the other facets of implementation–it doesn't stand alone.

The vast majority of teacher survey respondents (76%) either somewhat or strongly agreed that their school's policies and practices are driven by a focus on educational equity; therefore, we expect to see this focus showing up as a throughline throughout implementation. Indeed, in interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey responses, mentions of CRS MBL practices as a lever for educational equity were myriad.

For example, many interviewees shared **connections between CRSE practices and their pursuit of educational equity.** For example, as staff deepen their own cultural competence and reflect on their identity and what that means for how they show up in the work, they also are **increasingly reflecting on whose voices they are hearing or perspectives they are including, and whose voices and perspectives are missing.** As one teacher who had moved to Washington in adulthood described it,

> *"We live in different realities. Life is what we perceive, and life experience is different for folks.... When I came here, I could see the segregation. I found it interesting that people don't know the place across the street. Like, it's across the street, but I've never been there. And it's, you know, little things, like scholars have never had a* pan dulce *before."*
>
> - Alternative middle and high school Spanish teacher

This teacher is intentionally working on exposing his students to local experiences they may not have had previously, as part of his work to ensure his courses are reflective of local Latinx cultural identities. He works closely with various community partners to do this. In so doing, he illustrates the ways in which **culturally responsive-sustaining educational practices can help all students to develop and recognize both cultural competence and subject-specific skills and knowledge**:

> *"It's a classic story of the straight-A student who gets A's in Español, but can't speak Spanish. So they don't really have the skill. So I'm meeting them where they're at, using Universal Design for Learning, giving them a lot of opportunities and different ways in which they can show their learning. A very simple example would be, we'll get into a circle, and they'll have prepared to share in Spanish. They may be a bit uncomfortable, so I will coach them. I'll give them space. If you're not ready to speak, then just read off the script, because I'm still listening to pronunciation. I can help you in real time. And then just repeating that process until they can do things like go to the Mexican grocery store across the street here. So they had to speak in Spanish. A lot of them didn't have to use their script, but they were kind of looking at it, some of them reading it, which is fine. And then my language leaders and native speakers, they spoke organically. And I encouraged them to do that more, because it seemed, (from what I experienced so far) that they feel discouraged to practice the skill that they have."*
>
> - Alternative middle and high school Spanish teacher

This example also illustrates ways in which **CRS MBL approaches upend the typical ways in which certain expressions of knowledge and skill are privileged over others.**

Additionally, the emphasis on cultural competence has **re-emphasized the lack of racial and cultural diversity in the workforce at many Cohort 2 schools, and the ways in which that disadvantages the school in supporting all students.** Some schools have brought in additional staff, such as community advocates who work to facilitate relationships between the school and different racial and ethnic communities; however, the teaching workforce remains overwhelmingly representative of majority identities. As one White school leader lamented,

> *"When he was in elementary school, one of my older boys was so excited because he got a male teacher. He was like, 'Only the luckiest kids get to have a boy teacher!' because there are so few men in elementary education. And I think about, like, what's that equivalent for our students of color? We have a good proportion of our students that are never gonna see an adult [who shares their racial identity], and if they do, it's more likely gonna be a classified or part-time staff member. And that just… I don't know what can be done, but there has to be something going into our teacher prep programs and recruitment."*
>
> - Alternative high school principal

This quote demonstrates a recognition of broader structural issues that hinder the ability of schools to create fully inclusive multicultural environments, thereby impacting their pursuit of educational equity.

Many respondents also made connections between their implementation of meaningful assessment and their pursuit of educational equity. This came up most often through many schools' work on equitable grading, as described in more detail in the Meaningful Assessment: Grading Practices section earlier in this report. As one principal described it,

> *"Are you grading up or down based on attendance, based on attitude? I'm not suggesting that those things don't matter, but it is a different skill or asset (or lack thereof). So I think it's given us some really good pause for reflection, to improve our practice, to be more student-centered, to be more equitable. Our population is highly mobile and we have a lot of diversity. Some of our students are absent by no fault of their own. A lot of them take care of their families and their sisters and brothers. So I think it's given us to pause to make sure that we're meeting our kids where they're at and giving them what they need to be successful… and really assessing their skills and knowledge."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school principal

Related to the concept of giving students what they need to be successful, many schools discussed the challenging reality that **significant portions of their student bodies face enormous barriers outside of school that make it difficult to access the learning once they are in school.** Students who are hungry or facing housing instability, or who have arduously long commutes to school, or who are dealing with mental health challenges, all face additional barriers that schools are trying to also meet. **This was a strong equity-focused undercurrent of the discussion around timely**

differentiated support, as many students' needs are not just academic. Many Cohort 2 schools described using data to assess how students were doing and who might need additional support, using approaches such as MTSS.

Equity issues also emerged during the discussion of implementing personalized pathways. **Many "anytime, anywhere" learning opportunities – like internships, work-based learning, community-based projects, or career and technical education pathways – are quite resource-intensive. In under-resourced schools, or schools in communities with few job or internship possibilities, this can be a significant hurdle to overcome.** Given that some of these options are also tied to state graduation pathways, this creates some access and opportunity gaps, as this school leader describes:

> *"We don't get any of the enhanced funding for CTE as an ALE, and so we've gone back and forth about what that might look like.... Our state has tried to move away from testing as a graduation requirement, even though it's sort of there, so we have all of these pathways on paper that look great that students can do, but they're all tied to either testing or CTE, and so that isn't super helpful... You have to have certain levels of equipment, certain testing, and all of those cost money. We found ways around it, so it's not like, preventing us from doing it, but it is almost a little insulting when they advertise, like, 'Oh, we've got all these amazing pathways for students.' For* some *students. And we're fortunate! I talked to other ALE schools across the state, and they don't have the level of support that we do. So it's obviously a district decision, but you know, there are some places where students don't have access to almost any of the things that are being advertised as a pathway option."*
>
> - Alternative high school principal

However, **some schools in Cohort 2 also described ways in which their work to implement personalized pathways has closed opportunity gaps at their school.** For example, one school added additional math courses to help ensure that all students could have access to college-preparatory math if they wanted it:

> *"We used some of our MBLC funding to increase [a part-time staff member] to FTE so that we could offer a modern Algebra II course. Prior to the MBLC work we were not offering Algebra II, which was a real equity issue for our students. When I first started at the school many years ago, it was not a place where anybody expected any of the students to go to college. The students' perception of themselves and what they're capable of after high school has changed significantly with competency-based learning. And in the last couple of years, we started to realize we had kids who wanted to go to college, but we weren't necessarily offering the math programming that was allowing them to keep those options open as much as they wished for them to be. And that was just simply, like, a program and staffing issue. So part of our work with MBLC has been to have [this staff member] trained in this modern Algebra II course and*

implement it, which has been really successful, and that's also kind of led to the realignment of our whole math program."

- Alternative high school principal

Many Cohort 2 respondents also discussed **particular groups of students for whom CRS MBL practices were particularly beneficial – especially students with disabilities, disengaged or over-age learners, and English Language Learners.**

Cohort 2 educators who work with students with disabilities echoed this theme about the benefits of providing personalized pathways to consistently high expectations, as well as the important balance between maintaining those high expectations for all students while also recognizing that students' achievement in various areas can and will vary. As one school leader explained,

"One of the things that has been the most significant is that we have really focused on our students with disabilities. What does mastery-based learning look like for them? There were preconceptions about, well, this student has been traditionally in a self-contained program. Why are they here? Can they do this? What does learning look like for them in a competency-based spectrum? We've really delved into our preconceptions of what students are capable of doing and how we kind of put them in boxes before they come to us. Mastery-based learning has forced us to look at things differently. Our special education department has really come on board. For example, we have project outlines for different competencies, and they have modified them so there are very high-teacher-directed projects, and then there are very low-teacher-directed projects. And so that's directly related to this work. It has allowed us to really expand that vision. Instead of a kid coming in to be like, Okay, this is the competency, and this is essentially the spectrum that you need to do this competency in, it's really broadened. I think it's beneficial for all kids, but really the purpose of it has been to address some of the needs of students in special education."

- Open Doors high school principal

For disengaged or over-age students, identification of essential competencies, and an acceptance of personal pathways through those competencies, has been freeing, as it has allowed schools to focus on the most important skills and knowledge for students to gain and demonstrate, rather than requiring students to jump through a series of course-specific content hoops. Teachers shared ways they were able to help students master competencies through real-life experiences, like using the experience of filing taxes to demonstrate mastery of various financial skills and learning outcomes.

Similarly, for English Learners, a clear focus on essential competencies and meaningful assessment has allowed teachers to disentangle communication skills from content-area proficiency. For example, one school has allowed students to express their knowledge of chemistry in Ukrainian, aided by translation technology, and thus master grade-level science standards while still developing English language skills.

Key Takeaways: Equity

Equity is not a practice, but rather a lens taken to implementation practices that intentionally dismantles systems of oppression. A significant majority (76%) of teachers agreed that their schools' practices and policies are driven by a commitment to educational equity, and this theme came up frequently in discussions of both their implementation of CRS MBL practices and the benefits thereof. In particular, schools noted the benefits of a CRS MBL approach for many students who have struggled in more traditional approaches, particularly noting benefits for students with disabilities, disengaged and overage students, and English Language Learners. However, systemic inequities also hinder implementation. For example, many Cohort 2 schools have large populations of students experiencing poverty; at these schools, simply meeting students' basic needs and removing barriers to participation and learning takes up a huge amount of the staff's time and resources. Additionally, schools with less funding–whether due to community socioeconomic status or because of state funding models that provide them with less per student–face more challenges in providing CTE opportunities or other access to anytime/anywhere learning.

Factors that Support or Hinder Implementation

In this section, we will address the following research question: ***What school conditions and other external factors helped or impeded CRS MBL implementation?***

To explore this question, we rely on qualitative data gathered through interviews and survey responses from teachers and school leaders at Cohort 2 schools, as well as the State Board of Education and the professional learning providers from Great Schools Partnership. We are casting an intentionally broad net for "conditions and factors" here in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in Cohort 2; thus, the conditions and factors explored in this section include, but are not limited to, the external factors explicitly listed in the theory of change.

Barriers to Implementation

We categorized the qualitative data about challenges and barriers faced by Cohort 2 schools into over two dozen discrete themes. In this section, we review the most commonly mentioned in detail, and briefly outline the other barriers that were raised multiple times. Barriers mentioned only by a single stakeholder are not included here, as they are not generalizable enough to be a theme.

Theme 1: Changing staff mindsets and familiar practices

The most commonly-cited challenge to implementation from teachers and school leaders across Cohort 2 was getting staff on board with trying something new. This was particularly acute regarding particular facets of implementation, such as grading policies (as described in the meaningful assessment section above) or flexible deadlines (as described in the responsive pacing section above). Many respondents cited teachers who are unwilling to change mindsets or current practice as hindrances to the work. However, among teachers surveyed, self-reported buy-in around CRS MBL was quite high across the cohort, with between 67% and 77% of teachers saying they either agreed or strongly agreed with a series of items about the benefits of MBL and CRSE implementation for school climate, student achievement, and equity of outcomes. This gap between overall positive feeling toward CRS and MBL and the prevalence with which mindset change was reported as a significant barrier leads one to wonder if a small (but perhaps vocal) minority of staff who are opposed to the changes present a significant barrier to schoolwide implementation, or whether there might be something else at play.

Given the reality that many teachers did not grow up in or have exposure to a culturally responsive and sustaining mastery-based learning environment, **one reason why staff mindsets might be hard to change could simply be a lack of understanding about what CRS MBL looks like in practice**, as this school leader described:

> *"Because this was so foreign and new to some teachers, it was hard for them to envision, and they had to see it. Not everybody is a visionary. So [you have some teachers who say] I'm gonna take it and I'm gonna make it into something. But it's a continuum, and [other teachers will say] what does this look like in Spanish? So every*

time they got online [to do PD], they were looking for a Spanish teacher to be able to say, what does this look like in your classroom? And that was the most difficult… getting over that hurdle and saying, maybe we just decide what it looks like."

- Comprehensive high school principal

This desire for comparable peers came up frequently, with many schools citing it as a challenge in its own right. Although the MBLC emphasizes peer learning and a network for sharing and collaboration, schools in Cohort 2 often found it hard to learn from the exemplars that were shared, either because the context was so different from their own, or because the schools were in such different places on their implementation journeys. This balance of finding universally valuable examples to learn from, while also noting the particular nuances of each school's context and implementation journey, remains a challenge; however, many schools noted that the expertise of coaches helped to fill that gap.

Theme 2: Never enough time

The second most commonly cited barrier to implementation was time. This came up in many different ways. One common concern was that in order to move from theory to practice, **teachers need more time to collaborate and actually do the work that the MBLC is exposing them to** (developing competencies, building new rubrics, creating more meaningful assessments, etc.). As one teacher explained,

"We have those professional development times, but to be perfectly honest, we haven't had much time for us to collaborate as staff together and, you know, bounce ideas off each other."

- Comprehensive high school science teacher

This theme of limited collaboration time was echoed in the teacher survey. Although 55% of teacher respondents said they work in common planning groups or professional learning communities (PLCs) at least once a week, only 29% said they work with colleagues to design lessons, units, or projects across academic subject areas that frequently–meaning that designated collaboration time outside of already-existing structures is limited.

A second element to the concern about insufficient time related to the bandwidth it takes for teachers to facilitate student learning in a mastery-based way, compared to more traditional practices. **Many respondents were concerned that implementing more student choice, personalized learning, and formative feedback would create an unsustainable workload for teachers, especially in schools with larger class sizes.** As one teacher who was quite far along in her own practice of mastery-based learning explained,

"To be completely honest, it's very difficult. It is a lot of bandwidth, especially since we are still in the learning phase. The value, though, outweighs some of the additional burden. When I come out of a classroom having had, like, an extra spectacular lecture

where everyone's engaged and asking brilliant questions, it is enough to carry me through much of that additional weight that comes with this style of teaching. But it is very hard, and sustainability is something that is going to have to be considered long-term to make it work."

- Vocational / career and technical high school science teacher

Lastly, respondents mentioned the **time invested in the MBLC professional learning and coaching** as incredibly valuable, but noted its significant volume. MBLC funding to help pay teachers for their extra time was universally viewed as helpful, but has its limits, as one survey respondent described:

"Finding the time to rebuild this plane as we fly it is pretty difficult. Even paying people for extra time only works if they are either very inspired by this work and/or motivated by money."

- Comprehensive K-12 school leader

Thus, many were concerned that the professional learning–which is vital to changing mindsets and practices–would not be able to be sustained long-term due to time constraints and teachers' already-full plates.

Theme 3: System-wide reform is a daunting task

The third most common barrier to implementation was the sheer size of the reform being envisioned in the MBLC. Many respondents described being overwhelmed by how comprehensive the vision for school reform was. As one school leader explained,

"When we first saw it, I would say there was a big misunderstanding about what mastery-based learning was with our staff. I still feel like it was the next right step for our school–like, we're already doing project-based learning, we're doing mastery-based grading, and so this is kind of that missing piece to bring it all together–but [we didn't realize it was] so comprehensive. I think of the infographic that has the stages of implementation, the ribbon behind it. The first time we saw it I was like, 'Oh, wow, this is really big. Like, this is a lot of things.' And I don't think that was clear until we got in and then had, like, the first PD session, and then it was a little bit overwhelming. So I think the idea was that we were doing a lot of things, and we really needed support to, like, tie it all together. So it still was appropriate and made sense, and we're still very happy that we did it, but I don't believe that anyone actually knew what we were getting into."

- Alternative high school principal

Many respondents described the support they received from their coaches in addressing this challenge, naming that they worked with their coaches to develop a plan for where to begin and what the scope and sequence for change might look like. However, even with a stepwise plan for

transformation, it still proves to be a lot of work to both operate the current system and plan for a future one.

Theme 4: Building and keeping the right team

Another oft-cited barrier among teachers and school leaders, and also echoed by the professional learning providers, related to personnel challenges. **Turnover at a school, and the lack of a consistent team to carry forward the vision–especially when this has involved school leadership or a core member of the MBLC leadership team–is a huge barrier** to forward progress, and was not uncommon among. Relatedly, in many Cohort 2 schools staff are wearing multiple hats and spread incredibly thin, which limits their ability to dedicate sufficient time to the complexities and details of this work.

Theme 5: Uncertainty about the future

Another significant barrier to implementation this year was the uncertain political and funding environment described more extensively in the State Support section earlier in this report. The questions this raised for participating schools about the sustainability of the work, and therefore the value of the investment at this early stage, came up frequently in interviews with both school staff and the State Board of Education, as well as in teacher and school leader survey responses. As one interviewee described it,

> *"We've gone on this process, and we've been part of the collaborative, and it's been really enriching as a staff, and also just getting to network with our coach and to work with the Great Schools Partnership–but that has taken resources, and it's taken funding. What happens after this year, or when that goes away? What's the next step? We have created some really great tangible things in this process, but to really be able to continue this work, it takes continued development, and so that could be a hurdle on the way."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school business teacher

Schools reported fears about investing in staff positions or expensive programs–even if they thought they would be valuable–for fear that they would not be able to sustain them if grant funding was not continued past year 2. Particularly at districts facing serious budget shortfalls, the looming fear of scarcity and cuts to both programs and staffing, was heavy on the minds of participants. A few schools even expressed concerns that broader economic challenges like inflation would hamper their ability to receive outside grants or donations that they rely on in addition to the MBLC funding, further exacerbating this issue.

A second element of uncertainty is related to the current work being done by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to revise state standards (Embree, 2024). The standards provide the foundation for instruction, and even without the uncertainty of the upcoming changes, present some challenges for CRS MBL implementation, as illustrated by this survey response:

"Time is the primary issue in elementary school impacting our ability to work towards mastery-based learning. Our pacing guides don't allow for a great deal of extensive or deep dives into content strands. Additionally, elementary school teachers teach ALL subjects, with each subject having extensive learning standards. The amount of content we need to cover in the limited time we have with our students makes the prospect of "living" in an MBLC world daunting. We can occasionally dip into the application and student choice piece of MBLC, but we are working at developing the "basic skills" and foundational learning that allows for this deeper exploration later on in middle school and high school."

- Comprehensive elementary school teacher

GSP coaches mentioned that **Cohort 2 schools have expressed hesitation about putting in a lot of work developing proficiency scales and rubrics and performance assessments, since they're not totally sure what content standards will be required in the future.**

Additional themes

Other barriers that were commonly mentioned multiple times across Cohort 2 schools included the following:

- A lack of family and community buy-in around the work: Particularly in light of the national rhetoric about banning DEI initiatives, some schools were worried about community pushback against CRSE work.
- Existing technical systems for reporting student progress (LMS, transcripts, etc.) feel like a "square peg in a round hole" and take a lot of extra time and effort.
- Meeting basic student needs (poverty, mental health challenges, attendance, etc.) takes up significant staff bandwidth and school resources, leaving little left over for additional initiatives.
- In districts where similar work is a priority district-wide, it can be challenging for MBLC schools to know where to intersect and where to diverge with district initiatives. (This was particularly common among schools where the district is already doing work around standards-based grading, which frequently is conflated with mastery-based learning. MBLC schools also reported wanting to move more quickly than the district timeline.)
- Students have generally been trained in a "compliance" mindset with a certain vision of success; a deep transition to CRS MBL requires changing their mental model about what it means to be successful at school.
- An existing lack of trust between families and the education system makes it difficult to make reforms. One educator quoted the phrase "better the devil you know" to illustrate the lack of trust in the value of the MBLC reform work.

- Lack of district prioritization of this work, and a lack of interest in spreading it beyond the current pilot schools, makes it hard to gain momentum and build systemic changes vertically K-12–which impacts student mindsets, learning gaps, parent and community buy-in to CRS MBL, and more.
- Many students are coming in with significant gaps in their content knowledge from previous grade levels, which increases the range of personalization needs in a classroom and therefore increases the level of challenge for teachers, especially those who are new to mastery-based learning or have large class sizes.
- MBLC processes (such as the work plan, budget, and so on) are not as efficient as they could be, resulting in a lot of wasted time for school leads. Examples included difficult-to-use templates, mixed messages from SBE and GSP coaches, long email threads with valuable information buried in a series of correspondences, etc.
- Many schools were also involved in multiple other initiatives at the same time (e.g. switching to a new curriculum, rolling out a new learning platform, etc.), which dilutes focus away from MBLC implementation.
- Teacher preparation programs are still very traditional; few new teachers are prepared for a CRS MBL approach, and this means that it takes longer to hire, train, and build a "bench" that is bought in and familiar with these practices.
- Alternative schools cannot receive any CTE funding in Washington state, and therefore experience financial limitations in offering many hands-on learning experiences, making it more difficult to support personalized pathways.
- The Washington state reporting platform (CEDARS) is cumbersome for multidisciplinary course reporting, making it difficult to implement flexible learning pathways and cross-curricular courses.
- At some schools, lack of clear leadership and strategic direction from building leaders makes it challenging to get all teachers to follow through.
- At some schools, serious disruptions or dysfunction at the school or district level are affecting morale and stability–and sometimes even the school's confidence in its future existence. Although these broader issues are unrelated to the MBLC work directly, they create a challenging environment for any innovation to take place.
- Some districts are not very willing–or even seem unsupportive–of conversations about educational equity or culturally responsive and sustaining education, which makes it difficult to build community support and buy-in for this work.

Supports for Implementation

As above, we categorized the qualitative data about factors that supported implementation among Cohort 2 schools into over two dozen discrete themes. In this section, we review the most commonly mentioned in detail, and briefly outline other supportive factors that were raised multiple times. Factors mentioned only by a single stakeholder are not included here, as they are not generalizable enough to be a theme.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many supportive factors are the inverse of barriers. Although this may make the headlines repetitive, we still will explore them in order to better understand the driving mechanisms underneath. Overall, most of the themes are related to principles of change management, like setting a compelling vision, ensuring alignment and buy-in, and building momentum (Sarran, Clark, and Mendonca, n.d.).

Theme 1: Professional learning and coaching, both MBLC-provided and external, were incredibly valuable

The most common theme among survey and interview respondents was about the importance of professional learning and coaching for themselves and their staff. Although the webinars received some mixed feedback and were not universally attended, some interviewees did note with appreciation the changes made by Great Schools Partnership to the network-wide webinars this year.

Many schools also mentioned many other conferences, book studies, consultants, and other external sources of professional learning and growth they have relied on this year. Some of those external resources were referred to them by their MBLC coaches, while others were found independently.

Many also called out the fact that making space for staff to attend the professional learning sessions has been made possible through their MBLC funding, which reinforces the figures previously referenced in this report about how most schools used their funding to pay for staff coverage or additional hours worked.

In addition to helping build basic familiarity with the principles of culturally responsive-sustaining education and mastery-based learning, the **professional learning helped to provide compelling examples and a vision for what implementation could look like**–an important starting point in making any significant change (Sarran, Clark, and Mendonca, n.d., p. 6). In contrast, the **coaching helped schools to distill the big picture down into concrete next steps, tailored for their school's goals and realities**, thereby reducing an otherwise overwhelmingly large set of reforms to concrete, actionable pieces.

> *"I would say the coaching, particularly this year, has significantly impacted us for the better, and helped us with increasing our rigor. What we were doing before was good, and now it's like, okay, yes, this is awesome, and where we want to go and do more. So that, to me, I think has been the most helpful."*

- Open Doors high school teacher

Similarly, **the expertise of the coaches, and their familiarity with the national landscape of resources and examples, has been particularly valuable for schools that have otherwise struggled to find peer models**, whether that's because they are already quite far along in their implementation journey, or because of the particular nuances of their context. As this school leader whose school is part of the Big Picture Learning Network describes,

> *"We've been provided with the professional development support and the coaching, and that has really been very helpful, because previously, when we would collaborate, we would just collaborate with (other schools in our network)... but [there were] just a few, and they were a few steps behind us, right? So we didn't necessarily have the same opportunities to collaborate with schools who had been thinking differently about this work and push our own thinking, and coupled with just our geographical isolation, we just don't get out much. So being able to collaborate with our MBLC coach and have her kind of challenge and push our thinking in a variety of ways, has been really amazing."*
>
> - Alternative high school principal

Overall, the coaches' ability to push schools' thinking, help them get unstuck when necessary, and provide examples and resources to help them do the concrete work of the MBLC, was seen as universally valuable and appreciated by those who interacted with the coaches[8].

Theme 2: Scheduled time ensures prioritization

Another theme that arose often was about the importance of building MBLC work time into the school schedule. For example, some schools described reorganizing the master schedule to build in more common planning time for teachers who were working on co-developing cross-curricular projects, or designating calendared PD days for MBLC work specifically. This was often referenced as a way to both ensure staff buy-in, but also to help ensure sustainability and prevent burnout. As one school leader described,

> *"We do have a lot of time for PD and collaboration built into our schedule. And I don't think this would be possible if you didn't, because you can pay people for their time outside of work, but there's only so many hours in a day, and people don't want to – it doesn't matter at some point how much you pay them, right? They still want to, like, see their kids. So we try and be, like, super mindful of that, and keep everything, as much as possible, within the workday."*
>
> - Alternative high school principal

[8] At some smaller schools, this included a large number of the staff, but at most schools, this was limited to the school's MBLC leadership team.

A similar theme emerged around student schedules, with **many schools describing the ways they have structured their schedule to align with CRS MBL principles.** This includes structures like weekly "leaving to learn" or "special experience" days where there are not traditional classes, but rather all students are doing project-based learning or internships based on their personal learning pathways; student-led conferences a few times a year to reinforce student reflection and meaningful assessment; daily or weekly advisory meetings where students can receive timely differentiated support; and more.

Relatedly, multiple schools described the importance of carving out big blocks of time, even if one-off, to simply sit down and work through a big piece of the work. One school invited their GSP coach to come for two days during the summer and lead the staff through an intensive PD session to build out performance indicators for all of their competencies:

> *"We did that work in like, 48 hours, when our MBLC coach came. I mean, it wasn't actually 48 hours, but it was two full days of rapid-fire PLC time, two full PD days, like, 16 hours to actually do that work. And then we've kind of been refining and reiterating all year."*
>
> - Alternative middle and high school principal

Theme 3: Staff mindsets matter

Another incredibly common theme around factors that supported implementation was the importance of **staff mindsets, namely a learner stance and willingness to change, and a commitment to doing what is best for students, even if that involves hard work**. This mindset – characterized by a willingness to live with some uncertainty and to experiment, reflect, and iterate – came up over and over in interviews with teachers and school leaders alike. Some schools even mentioned that this mindset has become a core criteria for hiring. Others identified that staff with those mindsets served as "early influencers" who could then help model the work to the rest of the staff. As one principal described it:

> *"The biggest piece in this has been the vulnerability, right? And the willingness to step outside our comfort zone and try something different. I have a continuum of vulnerability where you have some that are like, jump right in there, sink or swim. And then I have some that they just gonna put the pinky toe in, and are a little nervous, because this disrupts what they've been doing for the last 15 years. They're afraid to fail. And so I have, like, a core team that we've gone through, and I said, I need you all to experiment."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school principal

A related theme that also came up often was that of the building climate. **Schools where staff described a relational, supportive, and collaborative school climate were also schools that were further along on their implementation journey.** However, we do not have the data to make claims about the direction of this relationship – e.g. whether staff having strong rapport and relationships

helps advance the work, or whether doing this work helps build strong rapport and relationships among staff. Our hypothesis, which should be further investigated in future years, is both: namely, that a positive staff climate is a supportive factor, but that the necessarily collaborative nature of the MBLC work also helps to build and strengthen school climate.

Theme 4: Clear commitment and follow-through from building leaders is vital

Another often-raised theme related to the role of building leadership. Supportive district leadership was also mentioned as a supportive factor, but less often than building leadership, which was raised frequently. Specifically, **having a well-respected building leader who demonstrates a clear commitment to doing this work in order to better serve students, and prioritizes it in both their words and actions, was seen as an important supportive factor for implementation.** Some respondents mentioned the word "trust" when describing the relationship between the principal and the staff. Others gave examples of ways in which the building leadership had clearly reinforced their commitment to the work, like this teacher at a school that had undergone a leadership change this year:

> *"I've only been here four years, but this has been the first year that I've actually seen a change for the full staff. I was already doing the grading policy that they told us to do before, but it wasn't actually required. It was required, but not required. Like, they didn't actually follow up on if you were doing it or make sure that you were doing it. But this time, it's mandatory. And so that gives us actual real data and actual real issues that we can then work through in a good, meaningful way, which has been awesome."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school English teacher

Relatedly, a building leader's focus on educational equity–prioritizing meeting the needs of students who have not had their needs met in the past, and changing practices as necessary to do so–was mentioned as a key part of casting a compelling vision. These points about the vital role of principals and other building leaders align with many of the core principles of change management, including reinforcing and monitoring the change to ensure that effort is not wasted (Sarran, Clark, and Mendonca, n.d., p. 4). In an initiative of this size, it is particularly important to ensure continuity and build trust that the reforms are here to stay.

Additional themes

Other supportive factors that were commonly mentioned among Cohort 2 schools included the following:

- Alignment with a school's pre-existing interests or priorities was helpful. Many schools described ways in which the MBLC work either built on work they were already doing, or allowed them to really prioritize work that had been on the backburner for a while. For example, work around standards-based grading, restorative justice, UDL, and MTSS were all mentioned as foundational to the work that schools were now doing in MBLC.

- Despite some limitations to the comparability between schools, many schools mentioned the immense value of site visits at other schools doing CRS MBL work deeply and holistically, particularly in casting a vision for what was possible.
- Use of Profile of a Graduate as a vision alignment tool. Especially when developed in conversation with the community, many schools pointed to this process and framework as a central pillar of their vision and mission.
- Many schools developed roles for teacher leaders and built processes within their building to keep the conversation going continuously, helping to bridge gaps between coaching meetings and monthly webinars. This included things like having MBLC team leads do instructional rounds with other teachers, organizing in-house conversations to debrief MBLC webinars, and other informal ways to continuously keep the work top-of-mind. Building in-house expertise was also seen as beneficial so that teachers could have a sounding board as they worked to implement CRS MBL practices.
- Support from community members, district leaders, and the school board helped to inspire confidence that this work would be supported and maintained long-term, regardless of state support.
- Community partnerships were vital in providing external learning opportunities and helping expand schools' options for cultural representation.
- Including staff from multiple content areas and grade levels on the MBLC leadership team helped ensure that work wasn't siloed to a specific part of the school.
- Discussing teacher bandwidth openly and often helped mitigate teachers' concerns about a long-term increase in workload and allowed schools to build structures that ensured the work of increasing personalization didn't fall on individual teachers.

Benefits for Participating Schools

In this section, we explore what benefits Cohort 2 participants see coming out of their work to plan and implement culturally responsive-sustaining mastery-based learning. We draw on data collected from open response items on the teacher and school leader surveys, as well as qualitative data collected through interviews with teachers, school leaders, professional learning providers, and the State Board of Education. Overall, we categorized these responses into approximately two dozen themes. In this section, we will discuss the themes that came up most often. Through doing so, we will address the following research questions:

- ***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?***
- ***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?***[9]
- ***What implementation practices or conditions contributed to the reported impacts or lack of impact?***[6]

Theme 1: Increased student engagement

Across all data collected from Cohort 2 schools, the theme that emerged most clearly was that of **increased student engagement and buy-in**. Respondents made many connections between teachers developing personal relationships with students and students' interest in learning, as those strong teacher-student relationships allowed students to feel known and seen, and allowed teachers to tailor instruction and content to students' interests. Many respondents also mentioned secondary benefits that emerge from students being more engaged in their learning, such as less trouble with classroom management and more rigorous, higher-level learning. As one school leader described it,

> *"I think when students are engaged with their learning, and when the learning is meaningful to them, then the motivation is there to be achieving at higher levels. And so we see students who had, when they came to us, had very low levels of engagement, and therefore low levels of achievement on whatever measures were being used in their previous school experience. And we see those changing drastically when the learning is higher engagement for them. And so what we know is that when*

[9] Our ability to examine the second and third research questions (about interim outcomes such as student engagement and school climate, and the connection between implementation practices and impact) is limited at this stage, as Cohort 2 schools are early in their implementation journey and we did not collect any student data in year 2. We have some anecdotal evidence about these questions through the lens of benefits observed by MBLC participants, but it should be interpreted as promising, not definitive.

we look at them previously, whether it was last year or the year before, whether they were here or elsewhere, we're seeing students really choosing to engage at much, much higher levels than they were before."

- High school principal

Theme 2: Increased student clarity about their own learning

Another common theme was **increased student clarity about their own learning**: what they're learning, why it is relevant to them, and how they are progressing towards their learning goals. These metacognitive skills, and the habits of reflection and self-assessment that support their development, were also mentioned as long-term benefits that students would be able to use for the rest of their lives. As one teacher described it,

"I think that [the MBLC grant]... has brought more students to the table discussing how they're learning. I think that that's probably the biggest part of it. You see students being able to engage in dialog through, like, our Portrait of a Graduate, where they're really understanding, like, what it is we're wanting them to do with those big buzzwords of 'discern' or 'communicate' or 'collaborate.' They're using those regularly. And I think having them come along that journey, and be able to articulate that in the classroom, is awesome."

- High school math and business teacher

Theme 3: Increased staff collaboration and standardization schoolwide

The next benefit that came up frequently was staff-focused, not student-focused. This theme related to the **increased collaboration among staff and standardization of different practices** due to MBLC activities, especially the personalized coaching and professional learning. For example, many respondents mentioned that their work with the MBLC drew attention to the many different rubrics and grading practices being used across the school, and helped to align staff around a shared vision and set of practices, which benefits students by providing more consistency:

"I think there was a lot of teacher bias before, and this has kind of broken some of that down. And a lot of the collaboration between the teachers, because of the initiative, the time that it is allowed, has really broken a lot of that down too. We used to have two Open Doors classrooms, and the way that those two classrooms assessed things was very different. And so that has really been a huge benefit too."

- High school Open Doors principal

A related theme that emerged here was the realization that **in the process of identifying core competencies or priority standards, school staff were able to have important conversations about their values and priorities as a school** and what they wanted students to walk away with. Sometimes this was already spelled out by a Profile of a Graduate, but not always. Sometimes this

process also helped school teams identify gaps in their curriculum – things they weren't teaching that they realized were really important for their students to learn.

Theme 4: State support bolstered existing priorities

Another common theme among Cohort 2 schools was that **the MBLC support allowed their school to focus and prioritize this important work and provided accountability to keep it moving forward.** Schools often are juggling many competing initiatives at the school, district, and state level. The incentives and accountability structure of the MBLC – especially the grant funding and its associated requirements, as well as the regular schedule of coaching and professional learning – provided both "carrots" and "sticks" that allowed bought-in schools to make genuine progress, even at this early stage. This was particularly true for schools who had been working on philosophically aligned initiatives, such as UDL or standards-based grading, prior to joining the MBLC. As one school leader explained,

> *"It's been really transformative for us. You know, there were so many great things going on in [our district] and at our school that dovetailed really nicely with mastery-based learning. But this gave us a kind of language and a way to bring it all together into a unifying, cohesive way of teaching and learning."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school principal

Theme 5: CRSE increases sense of belonging and appreciation of diversity

Another theme that emerged around benefits of the MBLC work for students was related to culturally responsive-sustaining educational practices. These practices, as described earlier in this report, take a wide variety of forms. This ranges from low-hanging fruit–such as ensuring diverse representation across multiple aspects of identity in school libraries, hall posters, and class reading lists–to deeply community-connected instruction and learning. However, regardless of the depth of practice, respondents pointed to the benefits of CRSE for students of both majority and minority identities. Namely, for students of underrepresented or minoritized groups, seeing themselves and their community represented in the school can increase their sense of belonging, as this teacher explained:

> *"I was literally just creating a worksheet about active listening, and I was using AI to help me, and it spit out scenarios where the names were all like, Jane, Bob, yeah. So I was like, okay, how about you make these, not so White-sounding. Even just little things like that are representation. Or it had occurred to me that in our worksheets we're always using either he/him or she/her pronouns. Like, let's incorporate in some other ones, you know, get some non-binary representation. So just things like that. I mean, I've been teaching for 22 years and I never thought about that before. It seems like, 'Well, duh.' But also, you know, I think that makes a huge difference for students, just feeling seen."*
>
> - Open Doors High school English teacher

Likewise, for all students, **seeing a more diverse representation of human experiences helps increase their cultural awareness and appreciation of diversity**, as illustrated by this example:

> *"We had developed a multicultural night, and we did it for the first time last year, and it went so good. I mean, people from the Hispanic community, from the Chuuk community, from all different communities came together just to celebrate each other, through food, through dance, through song, art, and we just spent an hour and a half together. It was great. This year, we had to change it up a little bit, because families fear being in the same place [due to ICE activities].... So our goal is to take it to a multicultural assembly, where it's something that happens in the school, and we celebrate all cultures and all walks of life together as students, as a student body, as a student community, as part of the curriculum, and recognizing the different variances that make us who we are."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school principal

Theme 6: Increased student voice has led to valued changes in pedagogical practices and school structures

The foundational belief in all students' assets, value, and potential is a consistent theme cohort-wide, as exemplified by this survey response:

> *"The most beneficial thing is that all students feel like they belong and, not only that, bring gifts to share within our school community."*
>
> - Comprehensive high school teacher

Out of this belief, a theme that came up frequently across Cohort 2 schools was that of **student voice influencing decision-making at the school.** There were many examples given here. For example, one high school Spanish teacher described giving his students a survey in which they reported an interest in more community-connected instruction, and then supported his students in organizing a community protest and awareness-raising event. A principal at another school described how students have started to come in during the summer to help plan the activities for the first week of school, so that the afternoons of the first week of school are now entirely student-led. Another principal described how the student council at their school met with the staff and asked to incorporate more service-learning and community impact projects into the curriculum, and that's now become a standard part of their school's curriculum and calendar. Or as one school leader summed it up,

> *"Those ideas kind of snowball. The more we were able to integrate those practices, and the more students led them, then the more the culture became really, truly student-centered and truly student-led."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school principal

Other bright spots

These examples were not mentioned frequently enough to be considered cohort-wide themes. However, they are a few concrete, shining examples of ways in which participation in the Mastery-Based Learning Collaborative has benefited schools and students.

Engaging the community in developing Portrait of a Graduate

> *"One of the reasons why I'm really proud of our Portrait of a Graduate work is after we came up with a draft, we then got student input. I then got input from a few members of our Nisqually partners from the Nisqually tribe through the lens of like, okay, what do you want? What do you hope for for your students? And what do you want them to get out of high school? We had our district equity team send it out to members of our BIPOC community; we got input from them. So, I mean, it was just really intentional about trying to get as many voices and as much input [as possible]. We sent it out to local business leaders. So we feel really good about the Portrait of a Graduate. And the question isn't always, do you agree with everything, but can you support it? And we can all support this one."*
>
> - Vocational/career and technical high school principal

Influencing nearby non-MBLC schools

> *"One of the things that's been kind of a benefit of MBLC that we didn't really predict as much has been that some of the work that we've been doing has started to bleed over into the comprehensive high school. So for example, one of the things we've done with our MBLC grant funding is to dive deeper into restorative practices, which is a really important piece of what we do at our school.... We brought students in to get trained with adults so that students can help to facilitate restorative practices. And when we did that, we invited folks from the comprehensive high school, so they were able to join with some of their students and some of their staff last spring when we did a training.... I think if you were to tell somebody 20 years ago that our school's practices would be influencing the comprehensive high school's practices, people would have thought we were crazy. But that's happening. So they are now implementing restorative practices, which is cool, and a huge cultural boon."*
>
> - Alternative high school principal

Recommendations and Conclusion

Overall, Cohort 2 has made significant strides towards implementation of CRS MBL practices, even in this early stage of MBLC participation. Though there is significant variability across the cohort in terms of each school's starting point, overall it appears that the lessons learned from Cohort 1 resulted in a strong fit between the participating schools and the goals of the MBLC.

There is overwhelming support from educators and school leaders in Cohort 2 schools for deeply implementing CRS MBL practices. However, there are some significant barriers to implementation, including mindset challenges–exemplified by a lack of clarity on what CRS MBL is and fears about potential downsides for students' learning–and logistical challenges–such as scheduling, technology, time, and funding constraints. Despite these barriers and challenges, participating schools generally reveal a commitment to continuing this work in the years ahead.

Below are recommendations for actions that would support Cohort 2 schools in maintaining forward progress towards deep implementation.

Recommendations

1. Continue to invest in public perceptions work, building a base of support for CRS MBL at both the grassroots level and in the state legislature, to counteract the instability and concerns of fluctuating support for the work.

2. Develop a comprehensive community engagement strategy to support local community partnerships that support CRSE implementation. Movements like community schools could provide valuable additional perspectives and guidance on family and community engagement and rigorous community-connected instruction.

3. Support OSPI in its work authorized under SB 5189 to adopt rules to authorize funding for students enrolled in CBE programs, to ensure access to adequate resources for applied learning and CTE experiences at all types of schools, including ALEs.

4. Develop more efficient and easier-to-use templates and processes for MBLC schools to communicate with SBE and PLP coaches, to ensure clarity of communication across all parties.

5. Collaborate with OSPI to adapt the state reporting system (CEDARS), in order to make it easier to use for schools implementing standards-based or competency-based grading, as well as cross-curricular course crediting.

6. Investigate rules limiting maximum class size, including funding needs to support a lower teacher-student ratio, in order to create conditions for teachers to build personal relationships with all of their students and provide timely differentiated support.

7. Continue to provide personalized coaching and professional learning, particularly in areas that would support increased implementation of CRSE such as developing educators' own cultural competence and critical consciousness. The challenge here will be how to provide the right balance of practical tools so that schools have concrete first steps, while also deepening educators' own skills and knowledge so that they can continually deepen their own practice in CRSE and identify ways to enact CRSE principles in their ever-changing local context.

8. Support schools in developing clarity around expectations and timelines for reassessment and responsive pacing practices, balancing the priority of creating space for students to learn on different timelines while also helping students develop habits of success and monitoring teacher workload.

9. Encourage districts to change expectations for how often grades are entered and updated, and help educate families on the value of alternatives to traditional letter grades, including through public awareness campaigns.

10. Encourage schools to assess what structures–such as course schedules and term length–might hinder teachers' and students' ability to allow students to move through their learning journey with flexibility, and provide recommendations for schools to build from.

11. When providing peer models, try to match visitors with schools that are similar to their own school on dimensions they consider important and want to observe (e.g. school size, etc.).

12. Build systems that make it easier for schools to share their expertise with each other, in order to increase collaboration and peer networked learning across the state. Schools suggested things like identifying and featuring schools with particular areas of expertise in the cohort (e.g. "this school did great work on this topic; talk to them if you're working on that") or building a collaborative space into the MBLC website where schools could contact each other and use a discussion board to communicate and post resources about various topics.

13. Advocate to Washington universities to update their teacher preparation programs to include a clearer focus on culturally responsive-sustaining education and mastery-based learning. This may include encouraging more student teacher placements at MBLC schools, so that new teachers gain familiarity with CRS MBL approaches in addition to more traditional comprehensive approaches, or other innovative approaches such as developing teaching teams (see, for example, the ASU MLFTC Next Education Workforce project).

Commitment to this work is evident. Cohort 2 demonstrates a strong foundation of professional learning and coaching, excellent support and guidance, and many schools already far along their implementation journey. In addition, the recent passage of SB 5189 at the state level, which is designed to remove barriers for implementation, suggests a promising path forward. By acting on these recommendations, the SBE can support schools in advancing CRS MBL implementation in service of more equitable and excellent student outcomes.

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