RACIAL EQUITY

AND

STUDENT CENTERED LEARNING

Applying a Community-Informed
Racial Equity Lens to
Student-Centered Learning

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01.

PURPOSE

In January 2019, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) announced new mission, vision, and values statements to guide the continued development of its organizational culture and grantmaking strategy. The Foundation's redefined mission seeks "to champion efforts that prioritize community goals that challenge racial inequities and advance excellent, student-centered public education for all New England youth." This new mission was the result of a year-long strategic reflection process by Foundation board and staff that examined the structures of race that shape the experiences and outcomes of every community and result in disparate harm for people of color in those communities. Although the Foundation has long promoted educational equity in its work, this new mission makes educational equity and dismantling racism and white supremacy in schools the central priority of its decision-making and operations.

Among its various responses to this redefined mission, the Foundation funded the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COSEBOC) and the Education Development Center (EDC) to examine the Foundation's current framework for Student-Centered Learning (SCL) through a diverse, community-based racial equity lens. The framework was based on existing research and cutting-edge practice, and it incorporated the experiences of experts and practitioners. As described in the *Student-Centered Learning Continuum* (produced by the Foundation), this framework consists of four, interconnected tenets that work in concert with each other:

- **Personalized Learning** recognizes that students engage in different ways and in different places. Students benefit from individually-paced, targeted learning tasks that start from where the student is, formatively assess existing skills and knowledge, and address the student's needs and interests.
- **Competency-Based Learning** allows students to move ahead when they have demonstrated in multiple ways how they have mastered content. This concept of achieving competencies – applying knowledge to different contexts – is sometimes called proficiency- or mastery-based learning.
- **Anytime, Anywhere Learning** takes place beyond the traditional school day, and even the school year. The school's walls are permeable – learning is not restricted to the classroom.
- **Student-Owned Learning** engages students in their own success and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process. Students support each other's progress and celebrate success.

During the course of this project, the Foundation continued to refine and reflect on its strategic goals and mission. This process was influenced by regular conversations between the COSEBOC/EDC team and Foundation staff along with the preliminary findings of this project. As a result, the COSEBOC/EDC team and Foundation staff agreed to elevate the emphasis on racial equity issues in this project. Our final charge, therefore, shifted from a focus on updating and revising the existing SCL framework to examining how racial equity strategies and SCL practices could be integrated to combat racism and racial inequities in education.

02.

SOURCES OF COMMUNITY INFORMATION

The Racial Equity and SCL Project collected the perspectives and experiences regarding student-centered learning and racial equity in education of a racially diverse set of community stakeholders.

The COSEBOC/EDC team organized and conducted two rounds of focus groups in collaboration with local partner organizations in six communities across New England (Boston; Worcester; Lawrence; Brockton; Winooski, VT; and Burlington, VT). Communities were selected with input from the Foundation with the intention of including a range of demographics, community types, and population sizes.

Three focus groups were organized in each community: 1) high school students, 2) high school educators, and 3) parents and other community members. These focus groups were supplemented by extensive discussions with each of the local partners and a series of individual interviews with other racial equity, parent, and community advocates to ensure representation of voices and populations in the region that were valued but not present in each location.

This section presents educational characteristics of these six communities along with Springfield, MA, and Washington County, ME, where several individual interviews were conducted. Individual interviews were also conducted with

parent/community activists working in Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island, and western Massachusetts.

Educational Characteristics of Targeted Communities

	# of Students	# of Schools	Community Type
Boston, MA	50,480	117	Large City
Brockton, MA	16,024	23	Large Suburb
Burlington, VT	3,926	10	Small City
Lawrence, MA	13,550	25	Large Suburb
Springfield, MA	25,007	61	Mid-Sized City
Washington County, ME	4,358	3	Rural
Winooski, VT	886	34	Mid-Sized Suburb
Worcester, MA	25,044	45	Mid-Sized City

Racial Distribution of Student Populations in Targeted Communities

	Amer. Indian	Asian	Black	Latino	White
Boston, MA	0.3%	9.0%	30.0%	42.4%	14.9%
Brockton, MA	0.4%	2.0%	60.0%	17.0%	16.1%
Burlington, VT	0.1%	11.6%	14.1%	3.0%	71.2%
Lawrence, MA	—	1.2%	1.2%	93.7%	3.5%
Springfield, MA	0.2%	2.1%	18.9%	67.1%	9.7%
Washington County, ME	9.8%	0.4%	0.8%	2.7%	86.3%
Winooski, VT	—	23.3%	25.3%	1.8%	49.2%
Worcester, MA	0.2%	6.5%	16.9%	43.1%	29.1%

More details on data collection and analysis methods used by the COSEBOC/EDC team can be found in the Appendix of this report.

03.

RACIAL EQUITY ISSUES

During the focus groups and interviews, all stakeholder groups discussed their perspectives on racial equity issues in education particularly as reflected in their own communities. This section of the report summarizes information provided by stakeholder groups across the region specifically relating to racial equity issues. It is categorized and presented in three broad, interrelated topics which will provide a framework for structuring the second phase of the project during 2021:

1. Pervasive nature and influence of **systemic racism**. This topic describes the broader context in which schools, educators, students, and communities operate.
2. Range of **racial inequities** identified by stakeholders and affecting almost every aspect of students' learning experiences. This topic includes school-level factors that are directly experienced by students, families, and educators.
3. Areas where intentional action could **promote racial equity** in schools through application of equitable student-centered learning practices.

Systemic Racism & Related Systemic Factors

All stakeholder groups across the region generally stated or agreed that systemic racism was reflected across a wide range of policies and practices in the schools, including: funding, staff hiring and training, and instructional content. There was also a general perception that the existence of systemic racial oppression and the need for social justice in schools had not

been sufficiently acknowledged or addressed by school leaders or staff. Although "calling out" systemic racism in education could lead to tensions within the schools and communities, it was generally seen as a vital step in advancing racial equity in schools.

The views expressed by most of the stakeholders were consistent with positions that have been publicly embraced by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation which has committed to "anti-racist grantmaking" and combatting the systemic racism in our education system that has "disproportionately negatively affected Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities." These views were also consistent with the views of the members of the COSEBOC/EDC team on racial equity in education.

Although none of the stakeholders explicitly mentioned or cited Critical Race Theory as a source or justification for their views of systemic racism, they used language that was often reflective of this theory. Critical Race Theory as applied in education challenges traditional claims of objectivity, meritocracy, and equal opportunity from educational systems and institutions. It identifies race and racism (along with other forms of subordination such as gender and class discrimination) as central to explaining individual experiences in schools and persistent inequities in treatment and outcomes of students. It views the lived experiences and knowledge of people of color as critical to understanding racial subordination in schools. It has an explicit commitment to social justice in education and elimination of racism as part of a broader effort to eliminate all forms of subordination. Both the Foundation and the COSEBOC/EDC team recognize the value of this theory and have applied it to this project as a framework for examining systemic racism.

There were a few stakeholders (primarily students and parents) who did not accept the general view regarding the role of systemic racism in schools. These individuals acknowledged

inequitable practices and results in schools but denied that these were racial in nature or source. Instead, they characterized school leaders and staff as exhibiting a general lack of commitment and competence toward the education of all students. They saw this as less a matter of racism and more a matter of a lack of support for public education generally.

While most stakeholders accepted the centrality of systemic racism, many also acknowledged the importance of intersectionality in understanding inequities in the schools. They particularly emphasized the importance of language and immigrant status while also identifying disabilities, gender, and sexual orientation as factors that contributed to unique challenges for different student communities.

Language was highlighted by several stakeholders as a significant systemic barrier for limited- and non-English speaking students and their families. Language differences could limit their access to programs and services inside and outside of school and was a factor that challenged creating an inclusive culture and dynamic between schools and communities. Lack of translated materials, interpreters, and individuals from their own culture could also limit their access to school.

Some stakeholders also identified "hidden" populations of color in some communities as another source of systemic racism in the schools. These populations included families of seasonal workers in agriculture, fishing, and hospitality industries often living in small towns or rural areas. It also included Native American families from tribes that were not recognized by the Federal or state governments, particularly those living in urban areas. In many cases, the presence of these groups was not even recognized by school leaders or local policymakers, and their issues were not identified or addressed.

Stakeholders identified several factors which reflected systemic racism in schools and directly contributed to educational inequities:

- School Funding & Other Resources – There was inequitable distribution of resources to schools serving students of color and inequitable access to educational resources by student of color. Both factors limited the quality of programs offered to students, their capacity to respond to needs of these students, or their ability to effectively support the healthy development of these students. While these inequities have always affected the ability of students of color to learn, they were highlighted during the recent COVID pandemic and the move to remote learning by many schools.

- Experiences of Families of Color – The lived experiences and daily challenges faced by many families of color are very different from school leaders and staff. Problems related to housing, food insecurity, health care, and mental health needs (exacerbated during the COVID pandemic) affect students' engagement and success in schools. They also create significant barriers to family engagement with schools. Schools often fail to understand or even acknowledge these experiences and challenges. Instead, they expect students and families of color to find ways to accommodate school expectations.

- Mental Health and Wrap-Around Services – These services are scarce and inadequate in many communities of color across the region. These problems also have been increased during the COVID pandemic. Students and families of color often lack information about availability of services. They face complicated steps to access these services which also serves as a barrier. These barriers are particularly significant for non-English speakers and immigrant groups because fewer programs or staff are available to support these groups.

Racial Inequities in Education

During the first round of focus groups, stakeholders identified racial inequities that affected almost every aspect of students' learning experiences and school interactions of their families. These inequities reflected their own experiences and observations in local schools and communities. During the second round of focus groups and the individual interviews, stakeholders were asked for their reactions to this list. Every stakeholder group across all communities agreed the list was a comprehensive reflection of important racial inequities affecting schools, students, and parents.

Stakeholders considered the failure to address these major racial inequities to be a significant barrier to past efforts by schools and communities to improve education for students of color. The racial inequities discussed in this section were particularly seen as critical **moderating or limiting factors** to the successful implementation of equitable, student-centered learning practices including the approach to student-centered learning that has been advanced by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation in the past.

Stakeholders discussed these racial inequities as a series of discrete issues. However, there was a general acknowledgement that all of these issues were grounded in a common source – systemic racism in schools. Moreover, there was also a general understanding that many of these issues were interrelated – with inequities in one area contributing to those in another, and other inequities being mutually-reinforcing. Both of these conditions meant that addressing the racial inequities required an approach that addressed multiple issues and took into account their interactions. Potential approaches are discussed in more detail later in this section and report.

Different stakeholders identified different sets of racial inequities as particularly important or crucial for promoting greater racial equity and improving learning experiences for students of color. The various roles and perspectives held by the individual stakeholder groups (students, parents, community agency staff, school leaders, educators, and local decision-makers) contributed to these results. These were also influenced by the particular set of conditions, accomplishments, and needs in each community.

These factors highlight the importance of engaging students, parents, and the community rather than just educators in developing plans for advancing racial equity using equitable, student-centered learning practices. They also highlight the importance of considering local context in developing those plans and recognizing that different communities may follow different pathways in advancing those goals.

The factors that stakeholders commonly recognize as racial inequities in their schools are points at which changes to be more inclusive and diverse would be recognized by them as progress towards greater racial equity. As such, these factors can serve as a guide for using equitable, student-centered learning practices to support racial equity.

Inequitable Access to Courses, Programs & Services

Inequitable access for students of color to valued courses, programs, and services in schools was cited as a significant problem by all stakeholder groups, particularly educators and community leaders. They particularly cited the need for greater access to more advanced STEM courses, programs that could help students advance their careers, and dual enrollment programs. They also noted that many students of color had to leave their neighborhoods in order to find quality venues for exercise or recreation. This served as one more barrier to accessing these services.

Several stakeholders identify non-English speaking students and English Language Learners as particular victims of this issue. There were often too few staff available to translate for these students, particularly for those that spoke low-incidence languages. One rural school relied on other children to do the translations.

Inequitable Student Disciplinary Practices

Students of color, particularly Black and Latino males, continue to be disproportionately disciplined compared to White students, often for the same behaviors. Inequitable disciplinary practices resulting in suspension tend to alienate students of color and result in their disengaging from learning and school. Inequitable disciplinary practices applied to young children of color stigmatizes these students early in their school experience and can continue to negatively affect them throughout their school career.

Lack of Cultural Diversity in Curriculum & Instruction

There is a continuing need for schools to promote the use of more culturally diverse curriculum and instructional materials by its teachers. Stakeholders reported that it was particularly important to "decolonize the curriculum" by incorporating culture, history, and traditions of students in the community.

Some stakeholders criticized existing efforts in their communities to promote greater cultural diversity in the curriculum as being too shallow. They claimed that these efforts failed to demonstrate a "true" commitment to creating culturally relevant and diverse institution.

Stakeholders did cite several external factors that have served as constraints on teachers, schools, and districts seeking to promote culturally relevant instruction. One set of factors are the polarized political climates in many communities which

lead some parents to object to such curriculum changes as "politically biased" or "advancing an ideology." This could undermine curriculum change efforts as decision-makers, school leaders, and teachers seek to avoid public controversies.

State curriculum standards and testing requirements are often perceived to limit the flexibility of teachers and schools in adopting more culturally competent, student-centered curricula. Some stakeholders questioned whether these were really constraints. They noted that states had substantially loosened standards and testing requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that schools and districts had not used this increased flexibility to adopt more culturally competent curriculum.

Lack of Diversity in School Staff

According to the stakeholders, few teachers are people of color and most come from outside the communities in which they teach. Students across all the communities reported having few teachers of color during their entire schooling experience. There was general agreement among all groups of stakeholders that diversity in the teaching population needed to increase particularly in schools serving communities of color. It was also seen as important to increase diversity among people holding positions of authority in schools and school districts.

This lack of representation among teachers and school leaders was identified as a critical problem. Building personal relationships and getting encouragement from teachers or other adults in school were seen as very important for students. However, students of color often struggled to find adults they could connect with because most had few adults of color in their schools.

Lack of Cultural Competency among School Staff

Stakeholders reported numerous examples of school leaders, teachers, and other school staff taking actions or making statements that were offensive, insulting, or demeaning to students of color. Some reported behaviors and practices that demonstrated explicit bias, implicit bias, and microaggressions toward students of color by school staff and even other students. Systemic racism allowed these behaviors to become accepted and normalized in some schools.

A lack of cultural competency among school staff was seen as undermining efforts to successfully implement culturally relevant curriculum. It was also seen as preventing teachers from successfully engaging or connecting with students of color in their classes.

Lack of Parent Voice in the Schools

Stakeholders reported that school leaders and teachers send implicit "messages" to parents of color, low-income parents, and immigrant parents that they place limited value on their input. For example, parents in one focus group reported that their schools administered surveys to them that offered them only a few possible responses which did not really reflect parents' views. These parents recognized that this was inauthentic and considered it a waste of time. When frustrated parents failed to respond, schools used this as "evidence" that parents weren't actually interested in the issue.

Even when school leaders allow parents to participate with school staff on committees, these groups often are granted little real authority. According to stakeholders, decisions are really made "behind the scenes" by the school leader on their own or with the teachers. The view of these stakeholders was that "people in power in these communities had visions of school success that differed from those of parents and were unwilling to share power with parents as a result."

Lack of Youth Voice in Schools

Stakeholders from all groups (students, parents, community leaders, and educators) expressed concerns that students also lacked opportunities for "their voices to be heard" or to identify "what they wanted to learn." They reported that too few school leaders or teachers knew how to encourage or solicit student voice on important topics or thought such actions were appropriate. This led to frustration on students' part and "students got to the point where they were not engaged in anything at school."

Inadequate Student Academic Supports

Students of color were characterized as lacking access to a range of student academic support services available to other students. As one example, stakeholders cited a lack of adequate college or career counseling. This meant that many students of color were unaware of the steps they could take (internships, volunteering in the community, extracurricular work, workforce experiences) that could improve their opportunities for college. This also meant that many students of color not planning to attend college were unaware of options and opportunities for career development. Other examples involved tutoring, mentoring, and other adult support from the community both during and after the regular school day. These services were often not available to students of color due to a lack of funding.

A **parent** reported that there are not many social supports for families in the area. Many parents have to go to work each day during the pandemic. Their children are staying home by themselves trying to do remote learning. These parents have been struggling to find resources for their children with little success. This is a big issue.

Promoting Racial Equity in Education

Stakeholders identified several areas where focused, intentional action by school leaders, students, families, and community organizations could begin to address long-standing racial inequities identified in the previous discussion. Each of these areas could also support implementation of equitable, student-centered learning practices. Some of these potential linkages are described in Section 4.

Stakeholders described possible outcomes, changes, or approaches that require involvement from community members and school staff to translate into action steps. These findings provide general guidance from stakeholders for pathways to improve educational equity in schools that could be achieved within the existing structure and capacity of schools.

> **Educators** described a powerful student-led initiative on racism at the secondary school in their community. Students met as a group throughout the summer to share stories of racial inequities in the school, and they developed eight demands for the school board including a more diverse workforce, anti-racism training for staff, and more culturally-competent curriculum. The school board has worked with the student group to begin to address these issues.

Implementing More Culturally Relevant Curriculum

Stakeholders encouraged schools to adopt more culturally relevant curriculum and instructional practices that explicitly focus on race and social injustices. This approach was seen as empowering students of color by representing them in the learning experience and encouraging them to be personally connecting to the learning process. It would also promote

greater empathy among all students by "getting them outside their own bubbles."

Promoting More Diverse Educator Workforce

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of increasing diversity among both teachers and people holding positions of authority in the schools and school districts. A more diverse workforce will bring diverse perspectives, stories, and lived experiences that allow staff to better relate with, understand, and support a diverse student and parent population.

Greater attention also needs to be paid to retaining staff of color once they are hired. These staff have higher attrition rates than white staff. These rates were attributed to these staff feeling less welcomed and supported by their schools and districts.

Participants in one **community/parent** focus group stated that racial diversity in the education workforce is crucial. They believe that students can more effectively take ownership of their learning when they have adults in the school that look like them. These are adults that they can trust, build relationships with, and ask for advice or guidance.

Developing Cultural Competence in School Staff

Building cultural competency among school administrators and teachers requires districts to commit to ongoing training and support. In addition, they need to build interest and willingness among school staff to engage in such training. It is not enough to mandate participation. School and district leaders need to promote authentic engagement through their own actions and statements. One strategy for accomplishing that could involve incorporating a focus on racial equity into supervision systems for assessing educators and administrators. Districts need to

encourage, support, and reward staff for demonstrating cultural competency and affirmatively promoting racial equity.

In building cultural competence among staff, schools should consider students' families and native cultures as assets to be leveraged. Teachers need to be encouraged to learn from students and families about their cultures. Schools need to encourage families and members of the community to come into the schools to represent and serve as "experts" on their cultures. Greater connections between teachers, parents, and community can build greater cultural understanding and competency among teachers.

Addressing Race & Challenging Racism in Schools

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of providing multiple venues, tools, and conditions for clear and explicit discussions by staff and students about race, racial inequities, and social justice. This should include both group and one-on-one conversations. These conversations should also be used by district and school leaders to send the message that explicit and implicit bias against people of color (including staff, students, and families) is not acceptable and will not be tolerated.

Discussions should maintain an asset-based perspective. Districts should recognize that some staff will be unable or uncomfortable engaging in conversations on these topics. As a result, districts should focus on building staff capacity and willingness in these areas. Discussions focused on racial privilege and bias must be framed in a way to be productive and meaningful. Districts should also explore how student counseling can incorporate an anti-bias focus to build student capacity to engage and support racial equity conversations.

One **student** talked about the afterschool program he attended during middle school. The program had diverse participation with students from different backgrounds. Though the program, the students met with local college students to talk about racial issues, diversity, and interactions with others both in and outside of school. The program opened his eyes to these issues and to how he could respond.

Improving Outreach, Engagement, and Communications with Families of Color

Improving relationships with families of all students, particularly families of color, should be a proactive, long-term, and collaborative effort by schools. To accomplish this, schools can leverage new and existing connections with community leaders and others that share cultural backgrounds with parents. Schools should also involve parents in communicating with their peers.

Rather than expecting parents to come into the schools, school should conduct activities in community spaces that are already welcoming and open to parents and families. Such spaces can often assist in overcoming language and childcare barriers as well. Home visits by school staff could also be critical avenues for communication and building positive relationships with parents.

Communication by schools with parents, particularly parents of color, needs to be proactive, personalized, and responsive to the conditions in parents' lives. It must relate to the situations and needs of individual parents and their children and demonstrate that parents are "being heard" by school administrators and teachers. Communication must also demonstrate a respect for parents' cultures, backgrounds, and goals for their children. Schools need to recognize that building longer-term

relationships with parents of color is important. These parents will be more willing to communicate and respond to people that they already know and trust.

According to participants in one **community/parent** focus group, successful Personalized Learning requires students to work with teachers who "get them" because the teachers embrace and understand different cultures. To build such a force of educators, districts need to bring parents and members of the community representing these cultures into the classrooms. They are in the best position to educate teachers about their culture and share important insights.

Promoting Parent Voice in Schools

Districts and schools should maintain structures and processes that authentically promote parents as leaders and decision-makers. This may require taking proactive efforts to ensure that parents understand protocols and practices for decision making in the school – efforts that may best be led by other parents who share their cultural backgrounds. Structures and processes should also be sensitive to linguistic and cultural differences among families and incorporate appropriate engagement and outreach strategies.

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of schools acknowledging parent input and suggestions. Providing parents formal leadership opportunities on any decision-making groups or committees could demonstrate the value of parent input. School must follow and take action in response to input and suggestions. Ignoring parents' input will alienate them from the process.

Promoting Student Voice in Schools

Schools should be proactive in encouraging students to share their ideas on important topics. Listening to students of color can be particularly important for schools, administrators, and teachers because they reflect a cultural perspective that may otherwise not be reflected in the discussions. Student input can be solicited in class or in school decision-making groups or committees. Administrators and teachers should take affirmative steps to ensure that students feel comfortable in expressing their opinions. They also need to ensure that marginalized groups are encouraged to share their perspectives.

> One **student** reported that she co-facilitated a series of student-led racial equity group discussions. Students identified the topics and set the agendas for the discussions. She reported that these discussions were very valuable for the school because they provided students space to talk among themselves on very difficult issues but also provided them opportunities to share their perspectives with administrators and teachers. Participating students felt that "they actually had influence in what was occurring in their school."

Providing More Equitable Access to Student Academic Supports

Mentoring, tutoring, and other adult support are particularly valuable resources for students of color, particularly male students of color. As noted earlier in this section, students of color lack equitable access to these services. Moreover, the importance of these services in meeting the academic and mental health needs of students has grown during the COVID pandemic due to students' isolation and added pressures on their families. Stakeholders discussed the potential for peer

support and near-peer mentoring groups as one avenue for increasing access and relevance of these services. They also suggested that such support could help students of color, particularly immigrant students, in overcoming social/cultural and language barriers in schools and communities.

04.

STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING & RACIAL EQUITY ISSUES

This section summarizes themes in responses to the student-centered learning framework as a strategy for racial equity in education. Stakeholders of focus groups and interviews provided insights into use of equitable, student-centered learning practices as a strategy for promoting racial equity, as well as perspectives on the utility and limitations of each individual tenet: Personalized Learning; Competency-Based Learning; Student-Owned Learning; and Anywhere/Anytime Learning. Stakeholders also discussed how strategies to address racial inequities could complement SCL practices to create more equitable, student-centered learning experiences for students of color. These findings identify areas of focus for the second phase of the project.

Overall Themes

SCL as Potent Strategy for Promoting Racial Equity But Needs Commitment & Refinement

Stakeholders across focus groups and individual interviews expressed a shared belief that the SCL framework could be a potent strategy to address racial inequities in education. Stakeholders also described the potential positive influence of each of the four tenets for addressing longstanding inequities for students of color. For stakeholders, "addressing racial inequities" commonly meant addressing structures and limitations that exist in school systems that reflect white-supremacist structures.

These structures dictated how students should think and what is viewed as meaningful knowledge and content. Stakeholders identified important aspects of SCL that could help counteract existing racial inequities in schools: 1) the focus of SCL on deeper learning and "teaching students how to think" and 2) the recognition of students and community members as co-creators of knowledge.

Many interviewees indicated that equitable, student-centered learning practices aligned with their cultural values for learning and education. For example, one interviewee noted that her culture viewed knowledge as property of the community. Therefore, she was drawn to the idea of greater input by students, families, and other community members into what was important for learning. This theme further underscored the potential role that equitable, student-centered learning practices could play in addressing racial inequities in schools.

While many stakeholders saw promise in SCL and supported its adoption, there was also a high level of skepticism about equitable, student-centered learning practices being successfully implemented in public schools. The challenges were seen as substantial and difficult to overcome: the extensive demands already placed on teachers; the complex societal challenges that would continue to make SCL inequitable; the level of coordination and restructuring of the work in schools, districts, and state departments of education that would be needed to adopt equitable SCL practices; and inequitable distribution of resources (broadly conceived as money, time, opportunities and/or materials). The nature of SCL also meant that it must be implemented across all grade levels: K-12. Otherwise, students would be required to learn in different ways at different grade levels.

Critical Role of Community Partners for Developing SCL Capacity Among Students of Color

One of the most compelling themes was that community organizations may be the most successful way to initially provide equitable, student-centered learning opportunities to youth of color. These organizations may have the capacity and understanding of the community and youth as well as freedom from the constraints that hinder the broad adoption of equitable SCL practices in schools. By providing these equitable SCL experiences, community organizations can also support youth of color and their families to pursue and secure a greater voice to influence the structures of schools.

To better leverage community partners requires a stronger connection between families, schools, and community resources. In several focus groups, however, this connection was viewed as under-developed and stakeholders said this contributed to the under-valuing and under-utilization of community programs that could provide important equitable SCL opportunities to youth of color.

> Two **students** described a community-based program they had previously attended which reflected equitable, student-centered learning practices. Students engaged in creative activities involving writing or the arts. They also worked in small groups on community action projects that addressed meaningful challenges in their city. Students also came together to learn about and discuss important local issues related to racial and social justice.

Guidance for Honing SCL as a Strategy
for Promoting Racial Equity

Another theme in our discussions was the important need to explicitly frame SCL as a strategy intended to address racial equity. The version of the SCL framework shared with stakeholders did not mention race, and interviewees noted that it was crucial to establish that lens. Stakeholders suggested several approaches to explicitly incorporate a racial equity lens with student-centered learning practices. These approaches included:

- Empowering parents and community members by expanding their formal and informal roles in school and out-of-school programs.
- Incorporating activities in school and out-of-school programs that promote student agency and formalize student voice in decision-making.
- Expanding efforts to diversify educator staff and retain educators of color.
- Redefining the systems used for student discipline.
- Promoting cultural competence and anti-racism in the curriculum by providing meaningful and sustained professional learning experiences.

Some of these approaches may be tested and investigated during Phase 2 of the Racial Equity & SCL Project.

Stakeholders also noted that equitable SCL practices should be used to maintain a focus on rigor while also used to advocate for greater student and family agency. A focus on rigor was seen by stakeholders as consistent with the priority values of communities of color. Stakeholders viewed equitable SCL practices, with their focus on real-world skills and experiences, as a way to position students for success in the workforce. SCL, which emphasizes greater student independence and critical thinking, was also seen as better preparing students for success in post-secondary education.

Stakeholders acknowledged that school leaders often operated as if there was tension between student voice and academic rigor and that promoting one goal inevitably came at the expense of the other. This perception by school leaders further underscores the importance of implementing equitable SCL practices in out-of-school programs to demonstrate how rigor and student voice can complement one another in equitable, student-centered learning practices.

Themes Related to Four Tenets of SCL Framework

Stakeholders in focus groups and interviews reacted to the individual tenets of the SCL framework and racial equity in education. In analysis, we identified themes that appeared across comments which provide insight into how each tenet may serve strategically to advance equity.

Personalized Learning

Personalized Learning was viewed by multiple stakeholders as aligned with racial equity because it focused on listening to students and making sure that they were heard. In focus groups and interviews, stakeholders highlighted the importance of relationships between educators and students for personalization. Educators need to know their students, and students need to feel like they can let the educator get to know them. Constructing a definition of Personalized Learning that ties student interests with rigorous learning was identified as a possible goal for future action.

The dynamic of a trusting relationship between educator and student- which is central to Personalized Learning - needs to also be replicated between schools, families, and communities. Community members need to be seen in the schools. Educators and school leaders should place a priority on creating strong

relationships at that level, as well as with individual students. Relationships between school and community leaders and families, if visible and authentic, can also serve as a leading strategy for personalization by modeling the types of relationships that should exist between teachers and students.

Some actions and policies by school leaders and educators communicate a racist approach which undermines the ability of students of color to build positive and productive relationships with school staff. A primary concern that was noted in several focus groups and interviews was the discriminatory discipline actions that were common across school systems (also discussed in the previous section of this report). The disproportionate use of suspensions and other actions sours the possibility of trusting relationships for many students of color. Also, there needs to be a culture that does not stigmatize students when they have negative experiences or make mistakes. Currently, these types of experiences can have a perpetual negative influence for students who believe they cannot or will not be able to succeed because the environment will not support them due to their past behaviors.

An **educator** reported that her school had close ties with a local university and other community partners. This allowed the school to bring in diverse experts from the university to their classrooms to make instruction more meaningful and authentic for students, who responded very positively. The school also drew on university students to serve as an authentic audience for student work. For example, students wrote and performed their own rap and poetry in front of a racially-diverse audience of college students. Students reacted very positively to these authentic interactions.

Competency-Based Learning

Participant perspectives on Competency-Based Learning stood out during our conversations as an area where there were few practical recommendations for actions that could leverage this area to address existing racial inequities. Across groups and interviews, stakeholders viewed the current system of assessments as dictated by high-stakes tests which impact what teachers focus on and how time is spent in schools. The system of assessment was seen by several stakeholders as a piece that sustains inequity in education for students of color. The results of these assessments translate into entrenched deficit-centered learning, where educators and students view themselves as unsuccessful learners based on test results.

The involvement of students and community in planning and defining assessments could build engagement in the process, rather than a sense of failure and alienation and the negative experiences many students of color have due to the current testing system. However, stakeholders could not offer examples of how this could be implemented or where such efforts currently exist. One potential next step may be further investigation of these types of roles and how they could be constructed.

Stakeholders did view Competency-Based Learning, conceptually, as a potential strategy that would address racial inequities. Competency-Based Learning is designed to address the gaps in learning that occur for students which undermine their long-term success. Currently those students continue to advance through graduation, even if they lack basic skills, and this affects students of color disproportionally.

Focus group stakeholders noted that Competency-Based Learning can promote the belief that students of color have the skills to succeed. Currently, assessments reflect, without context, that students are challenged to translate these into their structured learning experiences. Stakeholders were concerned

that when students have the opportunity to have a voice, they are intimidated or unsure of what to do and defer to authority.

Student-Owned Learning

Stakeholders agreed that student ownership of learning could contribute to improving racial equity in education. However, there were disagreements about whether students really wanted ownership of their learning or whether they would prefer to be told what to do because it is easier for them. These conflicts point to the larger challenges of implementation. Simply creating opportunities or singular actions will be insufficient to ensure authentic student ownership of their learning, since students may not be prepared to assume ownership when it is offered.

Students need to be supported to be able to own their learning. Where this support happens has not been sufficiently established and may be tied to student advocacy. Stakeholders noted that any place that students can have a voice is powerful. Thus, efforts could, initially, target opportunities where there is less resistance or obstacles to student involvement, as compared to complex, challenging structures such as curriculum, and then build from these early wins. Through advocacy in the community, students can be exposed to the history of how change has occurred in their communities and understand what it means to have a voice. Developing this capacity through community-based activities may have the advantage of distancing students from the constraints that limit student ownership in schools, such as set curriculum, pacing, and traditional power dynamics. A common view across stakeholder groups was the importance of teachers encouraging and creating opportunities for students to use their voice. This was also discussed in the previous section of this report. Working with teachers to expand the role of students in their learning may lead to incremental shifts.

Schools can support student voice through establishing clear structures with articulated roles in school governance. Structures such as restorative justice councils provide students with clearly defined roles in decision-making. As in other examples, the creation of these structures, alone, is unlikely to address racial inequities unless accompanied by additional actions, such as training for students of color to prepare them for these roles.

Some stakeholders expressed doubt that schools are effectively equipped or structured to amplify student voice. At this time, schools may be limited to encouraging educators to listen to students and giving students opportunities to share about themselves and their lives outside of the classroom.

> Some **educators** identify several community-based organizations in their city that they believe successfully encouraged students of color to be self-advocates. This was in contrast with the public schools which did not promote such skills for students.

Anytime/Anywhere Learning

Increased access to devices and internet during this period of remote learning has not wholly addressed inequities, but, instead, revealed to some stakeholders the complex set of factors that contributed to inequitable access to Anytime/Anywhere Learning. Educators noted how students could be affected by the lack of a dedicated, individual workspace or that school devices were shared with other family members. The experiences during remote learning were analogous to the challenges of equitable access to Anytime/Anywhere Learning prior to the pandemic, when access to transportation or access to robust social networks made it more difficult for some students to engage in learning outside of the traditional school day or school building. Stakeholders across stakeholder groups

noted cautions about the limits of schools to develop robust Anytime/Anywhere Learning programs on their own because such programs tended to favor students with strong social support networks and access to resources. Schools struggled to design programs that compensated for these inequities.

Anytime/Anywhere Learning opportunities were sometimes made available only to students who were successful in the traditional classroom setting. For example, dual enrollment classes may be offered only to students with a high grade-point-average or internships may only be offered to students who meet particular requirements. These criteria were viewed by some stakeholders as unfair, since students who were not successful in the traditional setting often found success in these alternative settings. They encouraged schools and communities to investigate how these programs could be redesigned to support the involvement of a broader range of learners. This could include developing stronger partnerships with community organizations for after-school learning opportunities or creating programing through these organizations for learning during the school day. Connections with community colleges also could give students access to stronger learning environments.

Stakeholders saw great potential for Anytime/Anywhere Learning opportunities to more effectively engage students in learning. This approach could give students a different perspective on education by making the *why* of learning apparent. As with the other SCL tenets, interview stakeholders noted that there is a need to build a stronger awareness of community resources among school staff, students, and families. This could also apply to businesses in the community, as stakeholders noted that internships and job shadowing opportunities, while potentially valuable, could be scarce in communities of color and may be unpaid or poorly structured. A focus on recruitment and greater encouragement and support for internships or similar placements in local businesses could yield quick benefits for

students of color. Community stakeholders provided guidance in how to organize and launch such opportunities. Programs with a service-learning orientation, which benefit and are visible in local neighborhoods, have been a successful approach for colleges and universities and that model could be adapted for high school students.

Students of color often lack equitable access to resources in their communities to benefit from Anytime/Anywhere Learning. Several **educators** suggested that students be explicitly trained in community organizing and networking as a strategy for addressing this inequity. Community mentors could also work with students to develop these skills. This training and support could help students develop the tools, knowledge, and voice to proactively connect with local organizations and businesses. They would learn how to navigate their community to get support and assistance.

05.

CONCLUSION

This report presents the results of **Phase 1 of the Racial Equity & Student-Centered Learning Project**. This phase of the project focused on engaging a range of stakeholders (students, educators, parents, and community leaders) from across New England to share their perspectives and experiences on racial equity issues in education and student-centered learning. Several critical findings and community needs emerged from Phase 1 of the project that will serve as the foundation of Phase 2 of this project.

- As a set of principles and practices, stakeholders viewed SCL as a strategy with the potential for addressing racial inequities in schools and advancing educational equity. While SCL on its own cannot erase racial inequities in the schools, student-centered approaches were viewed by stakeholders as potential contributors to broader racial equity efforts. However, the current theory of SCL has lacked an explicit focus on racial equity and needs to integrate such a focus to be effective in this effort. Stakeholders also viewed SCL as a potent strategy that is aligned with community values if SCL can be effectively integrated with a clear racial equity framework.

- Local context is critical in understanding and developing effective efforts to address racial equity in education. These efforts benefit from a focus on what is practical and feasible for creating student-centered racial equity rather than promoting a prescriptive or aspirational SCL framework. To stakeholders, "student-centered" also implied that learning incorporates an appreciation of the

local culture and history, which requires hearing the voices of members of the community.

- Community organizations and other community partners could serve as strong venues for providing equitable SCL opportunities for students of color and could potentially serve as leaders for advancing equitable SCL as a strategy for racial equity in education. The organizations bring an understanding of local context and relationships with families and students of color which provides an advantage over schools. In addition, these organizations may develop and implement equitable SCL practices without navigating the myriad of policies and historical structural challenges that limit school-based efforts.

Phase 2 of the Equity and Student-Centered Learning Project will investigate the development and use of equitable student-centered learning practices by community stakeholders in order to advance racial equity in schools. It will answer three guiding questions to inform ongoing efforts by community and school leaders and the Foundation to advance racial equity:

- What assistance can be provided to community stakeholders so that they better understand and share what they have learned about approaches and pathways that were successful in advancing student-centered racial equity in education?
- What resources and assistance can be provided to community stakeholders (particularly NMEF grantees) to inform and support their efforts to address racial inequities in their local contexts?
- What are the characteristics and factors that contribute to successful and sustainable community-based partnerships to advance student-centered racial equity efforts in education?

To accomplish this, the project will expand and deepen the involvement of a range of community stakeholders including members of the NMEF community advisory board (CAB), NMEF grantees, Phase 1 local partners, and NMEF staff. These stakeholders will be purposefully engaged with the COSEBOC-EDC project team from the beginning of the project in project planning and implementation including refining key project questions and generating anticipated products. All work will be carried out in a collaborative and reciprocal manner to ensure benefits to the community-based efforts and the project as a whole.

06.

APPENDIX

Data Collection & Analysis Methods

The Racial Equity and SCL Project relied primarily on qualitative data. The COSEBOC/EDC team organized and conducted two series of focus groups in collaboration with local partner organizations in five communities across New England (Boston; Worcester; Lawrence; Brockton; and Burlington, VT). Three focus groups were organized in each community: 1) high school students, 2) high school educators, and 3) parents and other community members. These focus groups were supplemented by extensive discussions with each of the local partners and a series of individual interviews with other racial equity, parent, and community advocates to ensure representation of voices and populations in the region that were valued but not present in the selected communities. Given social distancing mandates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that surfaced locally in March 2020, the COSEBOC/EDC team conducted all focus groups, interviews, and meetings with the local partners by videoconference between April and November.

Focus group protocols were developed and created with input from local partners. Local partners also acted as co-facilitators during the focus groups. A similar protocol was followed for each focus group to allow for triangulation across groups. Almost all participants attended both series of focus groups (e.g. the same students who attended the first focus group in a community also attended the second student focus group). Local partner organizations led the recruitment of focus group attendees to

ensure that communities of color and traditionally marginalized voices were well represented. In community and student focus groups the majority (and in some cases, all) of participants were people of color.

The protocol for the first series of focus groups included questions about how participants defined racial equity and questions and thoughts about racial equity issues in the community. The protocol also included brief videos and discussions about the NMEF framework for student-centered learning and its tenets to build a common understanding of these concepts among participants.

The protocol for the second round of focus groups built from the preliminary findings and themes identified after analysis of first round focus groups. In the second round of focus groups, the preliminary findings were shared with participants to assess accuracy and further discuss their relevance to each stakeholder group and community. Additional questions were asked to investigate SCL as a strategy for racial equity, supports needed for students of color to authentically participate in SCL opportunities, and examples of existing or possible SCL-related programs that could influence racial equity in their communities.

The second series of focus groups were complemented by 16 individual interviews. Interviewees were selected to ensure representation of important demographic groups or geographic regions that were not included among the focus groups. Interviews were conducted with Native Americans, racial equity specialists, state agency staff, organizational staff working on education in rural Maine and Massachusetts, and parent/community activists working in Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island, and western Massachusetts. Interviews followed a protocol that was adapted from those used for the focus groups.

A similar methodology for analysis and managing the data was followed after each round of focus groups and for interviews. All focus groups were recorded and attended by members of the COSEBOC/EDC team and the local partner. Each recording was viewed to confirm notes. Comments and information from the local partners were also incorporated into these notes to provide further context in interpreting the focus group discussions. The COSEBOC/EDC team coded the focus groups notes using racial equity and SCL frameworks. Themes were identified across communities and groups and categorized by SCL tenets and categories of racial equity topics (such as cultural competency, resource distribution, and student discipline). A second round of analysis was conducted across themes to generate findings and conclusions.

An overall timeline of the project and its activities is presented on the next page.

SCL & Equity Phase 1 Timeline

Q1 2020

JAN
- Project kickoff meeting
- Community sampling plan
- Site selection completed

FEB
- Outreach to local partners

MAR
- School closings announced due to COVID-19 and subsequent revisions to project implementation plan

Q2 2020

APR
- Continued response to COVID impacts
- Revised agreement with local partners
- Developed focus group protocol & agenda

MAY
- Project kickoff with local partners

JUN
- Began first round of focus groups

Q3 2020

JUL
- First round of focus groups continue

AUG
- Analysis of first round of focus groups

SEP
- First round focus group analysis completed
- Second round of focus group and interview protocol and agenda developed

Q4 2020

OCT
- Preliminary report submitted to NMEF
- Began second round of focus groups
- Interviews with selected stakeholders started

NOV
- Completed analysis of second round of focus groups and interviews

DEC
- Final report submitted to NMEF

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