

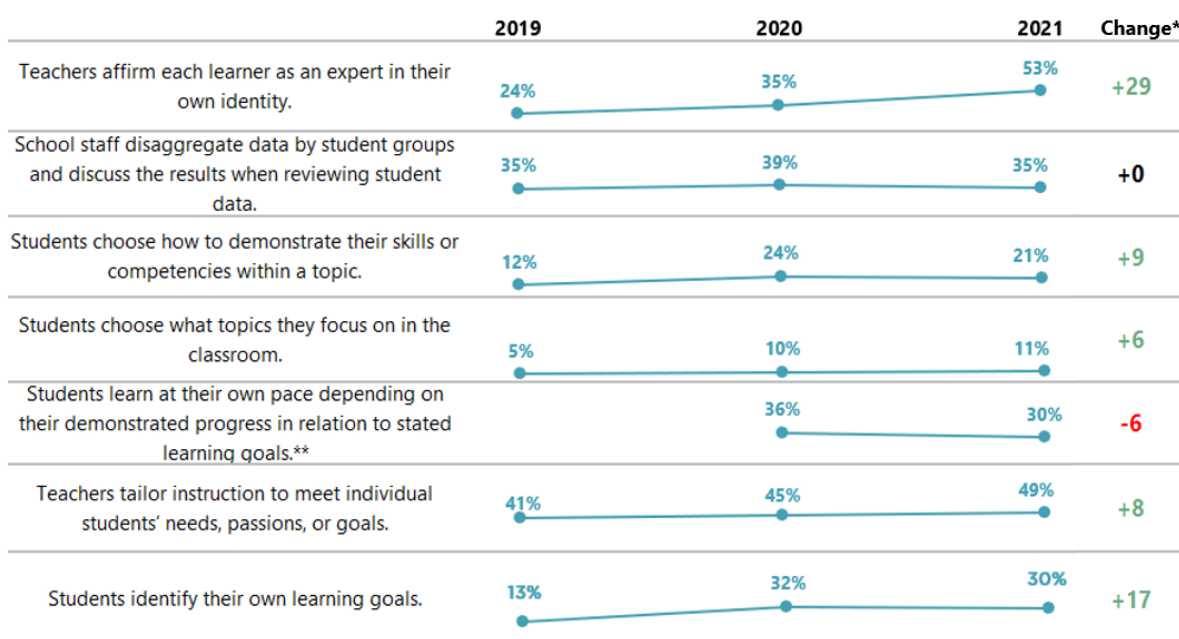
SCHOOL DESIGN FOR STUDENT CENTERED LEARNING PROGRAM: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2016, the focus of the Bush Foundation's education initiative has been making education more relevant for students throughout its region of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and the 23 Native nations that share the same geography. In pursuit of this aim, the Foundation invested in intermediary organizations that partnered with schools and learning environments, to build capacity for and facilitate implementation of student-centered learning. Over the course of the investment period, seven intermediary organizations were ultimately supported to work with over 80 sites and serve an estimated 50,000 students. Alongside these efforts, the Foundation partnered with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) from 2019-2022 to: 1) document the story of how intermediaries were building sites' capacity to attend to student agency, strengthen educator leadership and practice, and transform learning environments; 2) deepen the Foundation's understanding of the intermediary investment strategy to inform future education initiatives; and 3) highlight successes, challenges, and lessons learned to contribute to learning for the Foundation, its grantees, and the field.

What Changed?

As a whole, sites' capacity for implementing student-centered learning practices have increased. In fact, 77 percent of respondents to SPR's 2021 annual survey administered to staff at participating schools and districts expressed that their site's capacity for SCL has been "greatly" or "moderately" enhanced. Further, there appear to be more instances in which educators support students with setting and achieving their own goals. When asked how often students identify their own learning goals, 30 percent of 2021 surveyed staff reported "always"

Frequency of Culturally, Instructionally, and Future Relevant Practices, 2019-2021



*Difference in percentage points between 2019 and 2021 statistics

**Item was not included in 2019 Survey

or “most of the time.” This marks a 17-percentage point increase from 2019, when only 13 percent of respondents stated as much. In exemplifying this shift, some teachers were said to hold goal conferences, then create weekly micro-action plans for students to help them focus on their skill goal. From there, educators also worked with students on small skills aligned with their goals.

However, there appear to be fewer instances in which students can learn at their own pace, based on progress with learning goals. In later program years, the annual school and district staff survey inquired about the frequency with which “students learn at their own pace depending on their demonstrated progress in relation to stated learning goals.” While 36 percent of respondents reported “always” or “most of the time” in 2020, this figure fell to 30 percent in 2021 (six percentage points). Given the timeframe, this shift may be a reflection of challenges experienced during the pandemic. However, interviews with intermediary staff suggest that local and state policies surrounding curriculum and assessments played a role in the implementation of SCL practices – including pacing – in some regions.

Notably, over the course the program, practices across the Bush Foundation’s three relevancies increased. However, shifts that occurred because of the initiative are more easily observed with respect to instructional relevance, rather than cultural or future relevance. As such, the share of staff who reported that “students choose how to demonstrate their skills or competencies within a topic” either “always” or “most of the time” grew from 12 percent in 2019 to 21 percent in 2021 (nine percentage points). Similarly, the share of staff who relayed that “students choose what topics they focus on in the classroom” either “always” or “most of the time” increased from five percent in 2019 to 11 percent in 2021 (six percentage points).

Schools are similarly implementing more culturally relevant practices. While improvements vary and may speak to institutional shifts outside of the initiative, one intermediary conducted school reviews which gathered the community, parents, students, and educators in an “extensive interview process” to ascertain how to best meet students’ needs. Still, survey findings suggest that site staff’s inclination to disaggregate data by student groups and discuss the results appear virtually unchanged. This presents implications for understanding the extent to which students are being supported equitably.

In terms of future-relevant practices, there are some intermediaries that integrate future relevant practices holistically. For example, the “Portrait of a Graduate” model is used “to organize lifelong learning standards and to drive career and college pathways and academies.”

Making Education Relevant

The Bush Foundation's focus on creating meaningful and engaging education systems breaks down into three branches, each as crucial as the next.

Cultural relevance: *Who students are*, or creating learning environments that welcome and support students from all cultures and backgrounds.

Instructional relevance: *How students learn*, or customizing learning to help students learn in a manner and at a pace that meets their individual needs.

Future relevance (previously referred to as “career relevance”): *Where students want to go*, or helping students imagine their future and providing them with supports tailored to get them there.

Future-relevant practices generally continue to be more focused at the high school level, through opportunities like internships, work study, and senior capstone projects.

How Did it Happen?

Intermediaries supported site staff with adopting student-centered learning practices, through various professional development offerings, strategic planning efforts, and interpersonal support. As one school leader expressed, “the biggest impact of the intermediaries has been showing [teachers] that [student-centered learning] can be done and it doesn’t have to look the same.” This process often occurred through modeling personalization in professional development for teachers and working with sites to find alternative ways for students to showcase their learnings.

“the biggest impact of the intermediaries has been showing [teachers] that [student-centered learning] can be done and it doesn’t have to look the same.”

The extent to which site progress towards intended SCL outcomes reflects institutional shifts associated with the pandemic and newer efforts to advance equity are unclear. The pandemic certainly brought instances of unplanned reductions in intermediary touchpoints, due to shifts to distance learning and resulting shifts in priority at the school level. Also, the pandemic brought higher than typical levels of turnover among leadership, which often inhibited progress in SCL implementation. However, as expressed by one intermediary, generally school leaders and educators are now “caring for kids more than they’re focusing on content. And so, it’s opened doors for us to get to that point... they kind of know that the system’s not working.” As such, the shift in context that has occurred since 2020 may have facilitated more frequent employment of some culturally, instructionally, and future-relevant practices in many sites. Similarly, the types of SCL practices implemented and the sustainability of these changes may also be influenced by regulatory policies, particularly around assessment and curriculum.

What Was Learned Along the Way?

Over the course of the program, lack of buy-in from school staff, leadership, and/or community members, in addition to pandemic-related challenges, often stalled or inhibited intermediaries’ ability to provide support and meet goals initially established with schools. In response, many intermediaries adapted their strategies, activities, and resources to meet sites’ demands. These efforts were often thought to have facilitated the knowledge, interest, mindset shifts, resources, and/or system adjustments needed for progress towards initiative goals, particularly in institutions that were ready to receive intermediary supports.

“[schools are] caring for kids more than they’re focusing on content. And so, it’s opened doors for us to get to that point... they kind of know that the system’s not working.”

Consequently, sites’ baseline readiness to implement often emerged as a supportive condition to the implementation of SCL. This condition contains several factors, including whether the sites have already begun to implement some SCL practices, educators’ baseline mindsets towards student-centered learning, and the appetite for change across system levels. In addition, leadership turnover was thought to slow momentum or reverse progress. Across the country, the pandemic has contributed to higher turnover in school

and district leadership. The sites in this initiative are no exception. Intermediaries shared that, in many cases, this has naturally led to a break in momentum, given the need for relationship-building and the time it takes to get up-to-speed on progress to date.

Finally, the pandemic and the uprisings in the wake of the murder of George Floyd often brought new support for racial equity over the course of the program. However, it is unclear both how and to what extent student and community voices were centered during earlier phases of the initiative. While schools are generally better positioned to implement student-centered learning practices, future efforts would benefit from an “equity first” approach that thoughtfully engages stakeholder perspectives over time.

What’s Needed Now?

Intermediaries and school staff noted a few specific resources that would support the implementation and sustainability of student-centered learning. School staff, in particular, expressed interest in continued coaching and support from intermediaries, as well as an “SCL 101” training for staff and other tools to help teachers provide students with choice and voice. By contrast, some intermediaries pointed to the need to tap into the broader ecosystem of school funding and how dollars might be reallocated to support long-term sustainability efforts, independent of the Foundation.

Intermediaries’ willingness to drive for equitable change, and supportive regional policies are all implementation factors identified as warranting additional consideration. Intermediaries and school staff alike expressed a need for statewide assessment policies that allow for personalized and culturally responsive curricula, as well as flexibility with assessments and pacing. Further, thoughtful integration of community and student perspectives throughout future efforts may advance the initiative towards the Bush Foundation’s goal of building an education system that sees and meets the needs and strengths of every student. This includes intermediary selection, site staff recruitment, and instructional activities. As such, it is important that teachers implement culturally, instructionally, and future-relevant practices more frequently, but these efforts must be grounded in data to ensure that initiative efforts are advancing equity.