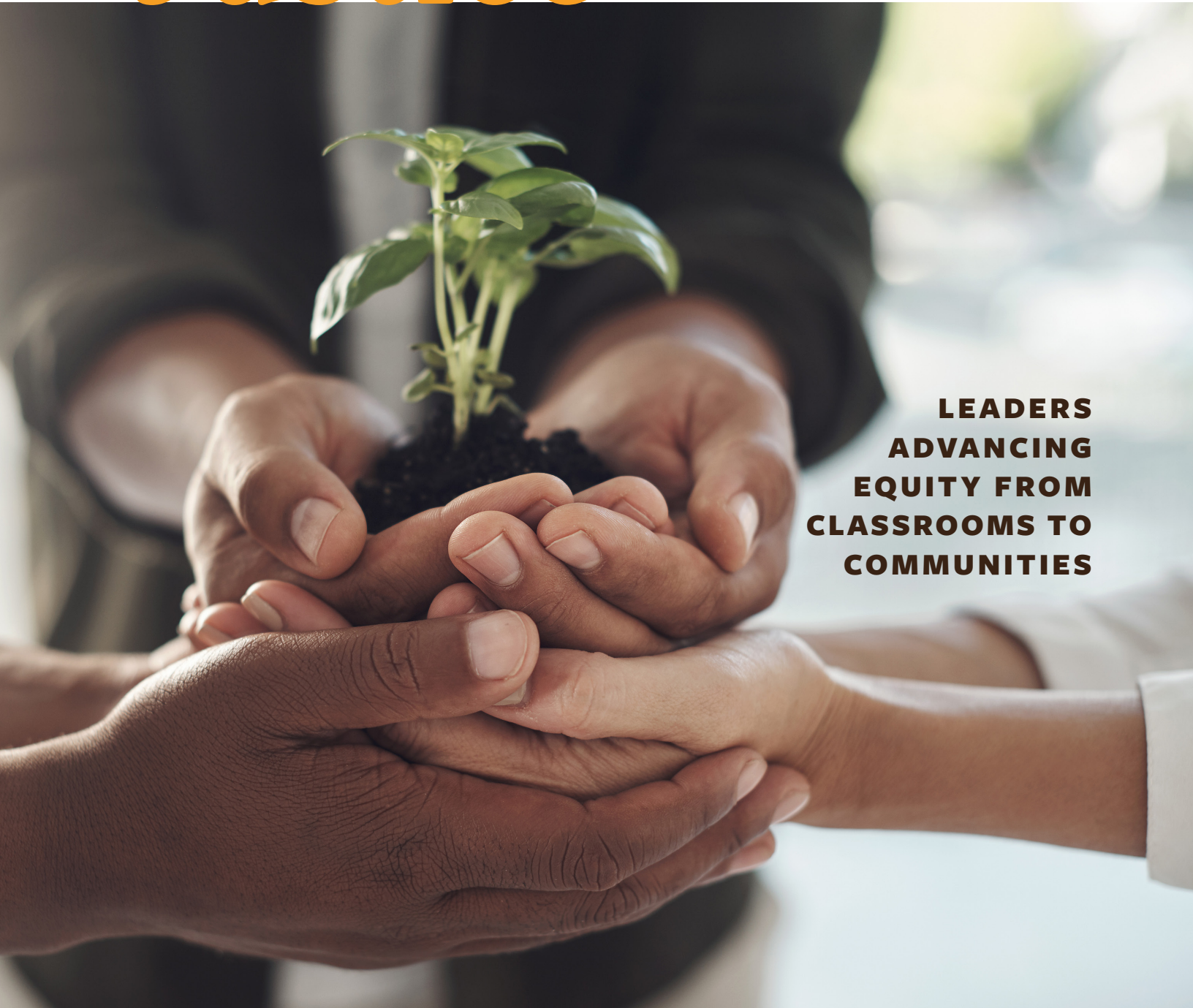


Unyielding Justice



**LEADERS
ADVANCING
EQUITY FROM
CLASSROOMS TO
COMMUNITIES**

Acknowledgements

*This report was authored by **Reflect Evaluation**, with contributions from team members **Martena Reed, Karla Mendez, and Shardae Osuna**.*

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Finally, we recognize and appreciate the dedication of the broader LJS community for their ongoing work in fostering educator leadership and systemic change. It has been a privilege to document the meaningful contributions of LJS participants and to support efforts that advance equity and justice in education.





OPENING REFLECTIONS

Building Bridges for Equity

Education is an experience that touches all of us, shaping who we are and how we see the world. It's the backdrop to many of our formative years—a teacher who inspired us, a subject that opened our eyes and our minds, or the daily beat of moving through the halls between classes. We all carry those memories with us: the cafeteria meals we looked forward to—or tolerated—the classes we loved or dreaded, and the educators who either made our day or left us questioning if we even wanted to return to school the next day. And these only begin to uncover the dividing factors in U.S. education.

While education is a shared experience, the quality of that experience can sit at opposite extremes. Those memories may be ones of abundance—vibrant after-school programs, well-stocked libraries, and educators equipped with the time and tools to nurture every student. For some, the story is one of scarcity—overcrowded classrooms, outdated textbooks, and limited opportunities to explore their potential. These differences define the education we receive and, for better or worse, shape the possibilities and futures we can imagine for ourselves.

Seventy years after the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the promise of equity in education remains unfulfilled. Students across the nation continue to encounter systemic barriers. Many schools remain segregated, disparities in resources persist, and policies often fail to support marginalized students. Research shows that racial and economic segregation in schools has been increasing over the past three decades, driven by district zoning practices and a growing emphasis on school choice over integration.¹ These challenges are further compounded by legislative efforts to restrict the teaching of race and systemic inequities in schools² and the potential dismantling or reduction of the Department of Education, raising questions about federal education assistance programs, like Title I.

¹ <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/70-years-after-brown-v-board-education-new-research-shows-rise-school-segregation>

² The Reg Review



In this uncertain landscape, the National Education Association’s (NEA) Leaders for Just Schools (LJS) program offers a beacon of hope. LJS equips educators with the skills and knowledge to navigate systemic inequities, advocate for change, and build networks of equity-focused leadership. This is evident in one participant’s journey. LJS became the catalyst for addressing growing incidents of hate speech and identity-based bullying in her Connecticut school district. The urgency of the issue hit home when a student, known for their love of learning, refused to return to school after being targeted by hate speech. “This was a child who loved school, but the climate was so negative that she refused to come back,” the teacher reflected.

“That really pushed me to say that this is bigger than me. It’s bigger than just one school. It is something that needs to be codified into law.”

Drawing on her LJS learning journey, she moved beyond individual student support to pursue legislative change. At county forums, she advocated for state policy to address hate speech effects on children with support from community members who provided written testimony in support of the bill.

Her efforts contributed to the successful passage of state legislation, Senate Bill 327, establishing a task force of educators, social workers, and counselors to study the effects of hate speech and bullying on children. Building on this policy win, she then worked to strengthen school climate and anti-bullying policies at the district level. The policy change created frameworks for implementing immediate support systems, including a student-led anti-hate program addressing identity, bias, and bullying. The impact of this policy change continues to grow as she now chairs her state affiliate’s racial equity commission and helps other districts develop similar initiatives.

This is just one of several meaningful testimonials emerging from the evaluation of Leaders for Just Schools. By equipping educators with tools and knowledge, LJS works to move us closer to a future where all students have the opportunity to succeed. This evaluation report tells the story of the LJS program’s journey thus far—successes, challenges, and potential for the future. It highlights the strides educators have made toward creating just and equitable schools while uncovering lessons to foster the program’s growth.





Context & Purpose

The LJS program is designed to equip educators with tools to foster equity & systemic change.

the Leaders for Just Schools (LJS) program equips educators with the tools and strategies needed to foster equity and drive systemic change within their schools and communities. At its core, the program provides a structured, multi-year learning journey designed to build participants' capacity for transformative leadership. The curriculum is organized around three key pillars: addressing personal bias, engaging with families and communities, and advancing institutional change. In the first year, participants focus on recognizing and confronting their own biases and understanding their spheres of influence. This foundational work is complemented in the second year with an emphasis on building meaningful partnerships with families, communities, and other interest-holders³ to collaboratively pursue equity. By the third year, the curriculum is designed to guide participants toward tackling institutional and systemic inequities by identifying a specific equity problem and developing actionable solutions.

The program supports participants throughout this journey with structured processes, including monthly check-ins with facilitators, bi-monthly learning extension sessions, and quarterly cohort meetings. The



annual “MegaWeek” serves as a cornerstone for each program year, providing intensive coaching—the primary mode for learning—and opportunities to set and refine goals aligned with their learning focus. These touchpoints collectively ensure consistent engagement and allow participants to adjust their goals as needed. At the culmination of the program, completers participate in a ceremony where they present their work, highlighting the barriers they

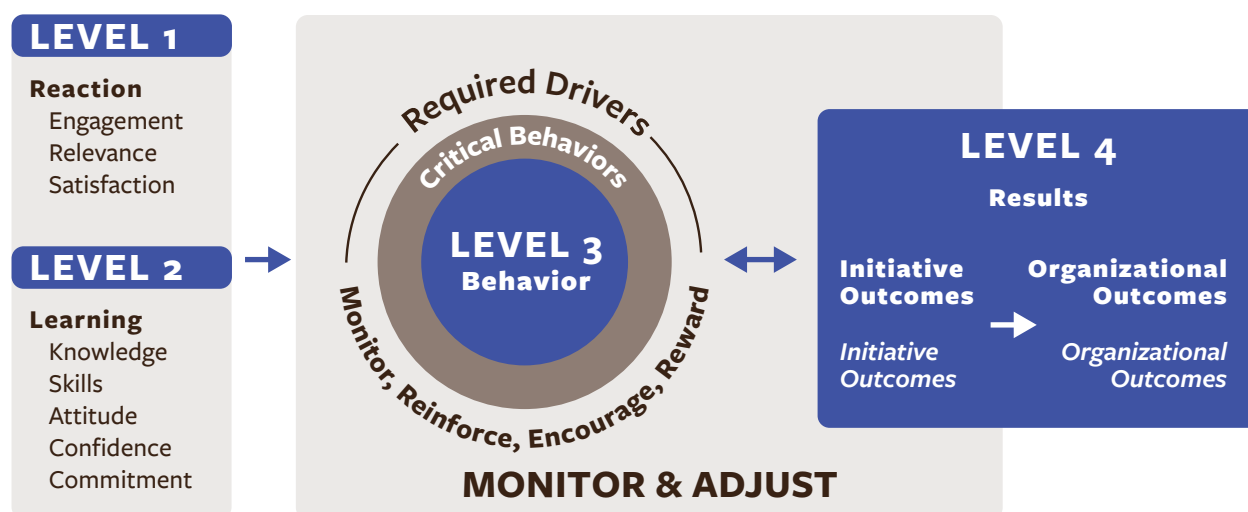
³ We choose to avoid the term “stakeholder” due to its potential associations with colonial historical contexts. The term can imply ownership, similar to colonial practices of laying claim to lands and resources, often at the expense of indigenous and local communities’ rights and sovereignties. Instead, we use the term interest-holder.

addressed, the solutions they developed, and the changes they achieved. Additionally, both completers and non-completers are invited to join the LJS alumni network, which supports continued collaboration on policy-based solutions and fosters an active professional learning community.

Our evaluation assesses contributions to change & informs future direction.

The evaluation of the Leaders for Just Schools (LJS) program examines participant outcomes and their efforts to make change within their broader educational ecosystems. Designed to reflect on the program's contributions and guide its future direction, the evaluation addresses two primary objectives: 1) understand the adoption and integration of the LJS curriculum by participants and alumni; 2) assess LJS participants' contributions to educational policy and systemic changes.

The Reflect team designed a mixed-methods evaluation to address the evaluation objectives. The evaluation framework is based on the Kirkpatrick Model⁴, focusing on the third and fourth levels—Behavior and Results. These levels examine how participants internalize program learnings (direct pathway) and the broader impacts on policies and practices (indirect pathway). The evaluation process began with discovery, which informed the development of data collection instruments and sampling, followed by an outcome harvesting survey, LJS participant interviews, and interviews with collaborators—individuals who worked closely with participants to pursue change efforts.



The initial phase of the evaluation included a briefing with NEA staff review of program documents and existing survey data. Program documents, such as curriculum guides and pathway descriptions, clarified the tools and strategies provided to participants for addressing personal bias, engaging communities, and pursuing systemic change. Existing NEA survey data offered insights into participant demographics, their leadership activities, and early indications of systemic changes they had influenced. This phase established

⁴ The Kirkpatrick Model is a framework for evaluating the results of training and learning programs.

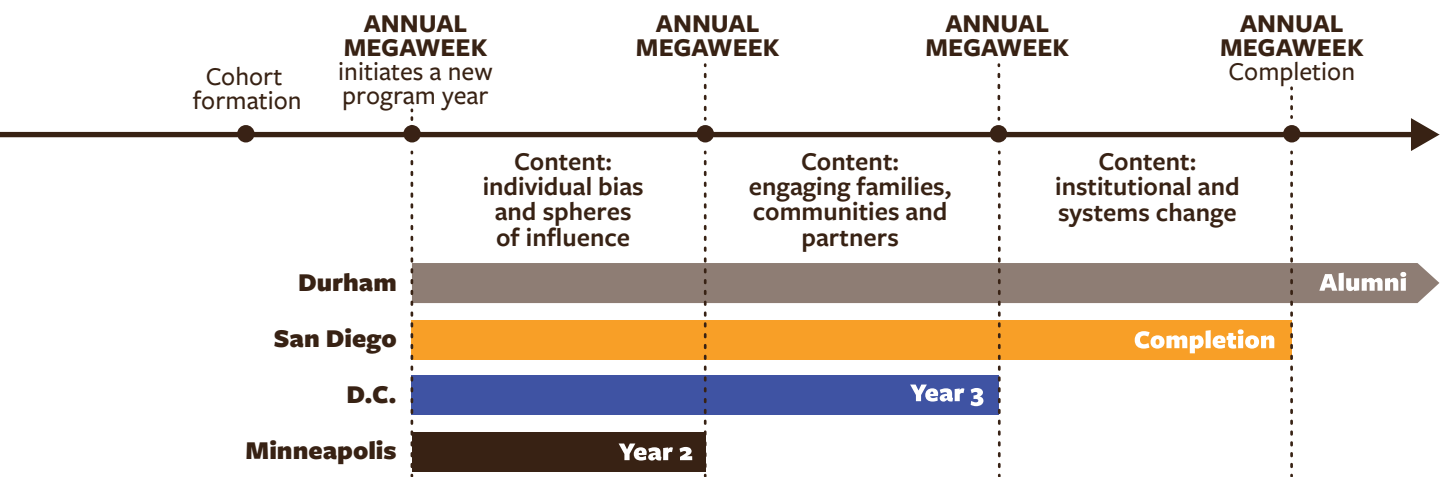
a strong foundation for understanding the population of LJS participants, developing evaluation instruments, and focusing data collection efforts.

Outcome harvesting is a methodology designed to identify and analyze specific changes—both anticipated and unanticipated—attributed to a program’s activities. It focuses on outcomes rather than predefined goals, making it particularly effective for programs like Leaders for Just Schools (LJS), which aim to influence systemic change indirectly. As the central methodology for this evaluation, outcome harvesting enabled evaluators to trace how participants internalized the knowledge, tools, and strategies provided by the program and used them to effect change. The approach offered a structured way to trace the program’s influence on participants’ actions and the outcomes they achieved, addressing key evaluation objectives such as the program’s impact on policy and systemic changes and the adoption of the LJS curriculum.

The outcome harvesting process began with a survey designed to document specific outcomes attributed to the program. The survey combined closed-ended questions to quantify common outcomes with open-ended questions that invited participants to narrate their experiences. Participants from four selected cohorts—Durham, San Diego, Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis—were invited to complete the outcome harvesting survey⁵, which provided data on policy, systemic, and practice-based changes influenced by the program.

Interviews with participants were conducted across three selected cohorts—Durham, San Diego, and Washington, D.C.—representing different stages of the program. The selected participants and alumni had either completed or were close to completing the program, increasing the likelihood that the changes they pursued and the tools they used were influenced by their participation in LJS. Minneapolis, in year two of the program, had not yet been introduced to content focused on institutional and systemic change. So, they were not included in the outcome harvesting interviews.

As of summer/July 2024



Collaborators—such as school administrators, district leaders, and community partners—were also interviewed to provide external perspectives on participants’ actions. These interviews added depth to the evaluation by validating reported outcomes, highlighting ripple effects, and offering insights into how participants’ advocacy influenced broader educational ecosystems.

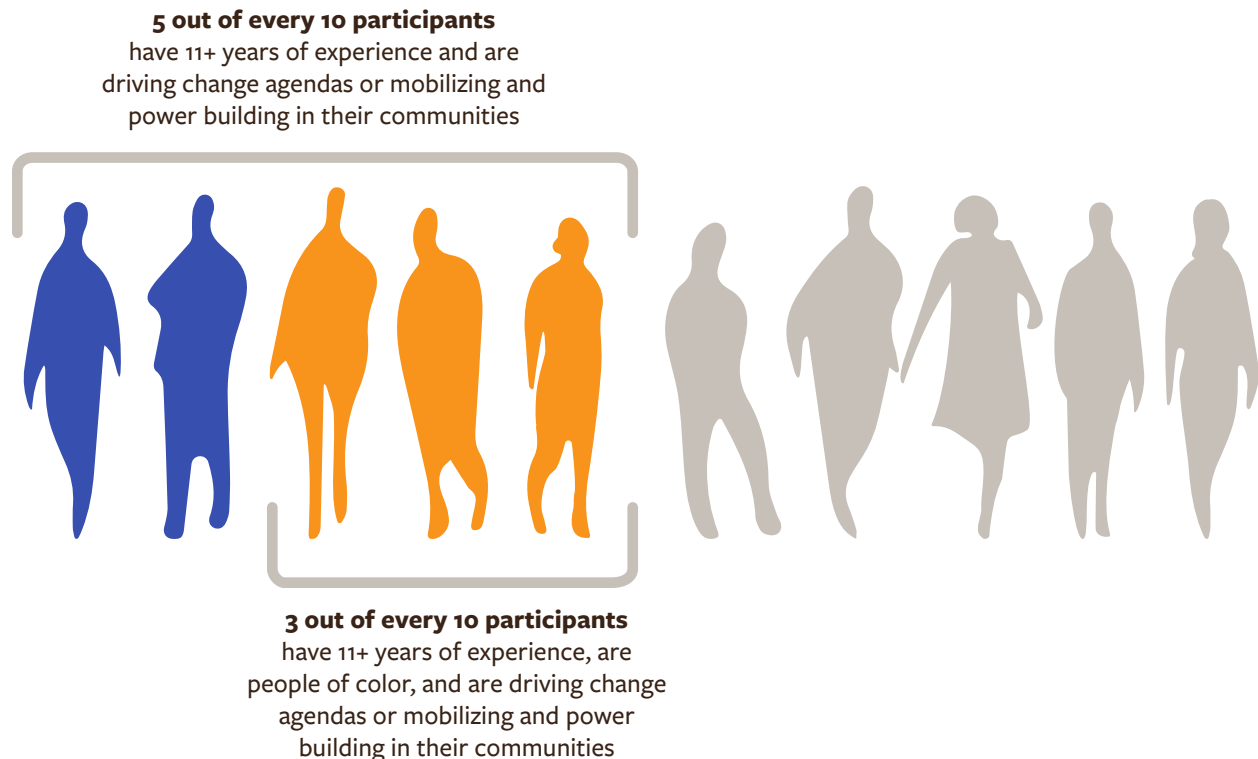
⁵ The newest LJS cohort, Denver, was not included in the survey as they were just beginning the program in July 2024.



Program Reach & Influence

Since 2019, the LJS program has brought together over 315 educators from 44 states and territories. Spanning every corner of the country—from Maine to Hawaii and Alaska to the territory of Puerto Rico—the program demonstrates its national reach and ability to connect with educators in diverse contexts. Working in statewide and local education associations, school districts, and classrooms, each participant and alum bring their unique perspective but share a unifying commitment to create more just and equitable education systems.

A standout feature of LJS is its strong appeal to seasoned educators. The program attracts veteran educators of color who see themselves as driving change agendas or mobilizing and power building among communities. Combined with their lived experience, seasoned educators bring a deep understanding of the challenges faced by students, schools, and communities. For them, LJS seems to act as a springboard, providing information, networks, and strategies to take their influence to the next level.





From Reach to Ripple Effects

the broad reach and diverse influence of the LJS program have sparked meaningful shifts within participants' networks, classrooms, and across education systems. With participants leveraging LJS experiences and the program's resources, their efforts have created ripple effects that extend beyond individual actions. The ripple effects of these initiatives can be understood through the Kirkpatrick Model of Evaluation, which organizes outcomes into layers of reaction, learning, behavior, and results. This framework reveals how targeted efforts to advance equity in education evolved from individual learning

This framework reveals how targeted efforts to advance equity in education evolved from individual learning experiences into widespread changes.

experiences into widespread changes. The reaction level is at the heart of the ripple where individuals engaged deeply with the experiences and opportunities presented by leadership development programs like Leaders for Just Schools. It radiates outward to the other layers of the Kirkpatrick Model where our evaluation focuses. From reaction stems learning, as individuals acquire the knowledge and skills to engage with equity-focused work. Learning then translates into behavior, as participants implement new practices, lead advocacy efforts, and collaborate with others to create change. These shifts in behavior, in turn, produce measurable results at organizational, systemic, and community levels. Outcome harvesting is particularly useful for assessing results within the Kirkpatrick Model, one of the more challenging levels of change to measure, as it captures tangible

outcomes that emerge from complex and often nonlinear processes. While our outcome harvesting interviews and survey focused on four specific outcome areas—practice, policy, systems, and union-related changes—the following harvested outcomes, organized by the Kirkpatrick Model, reveal broader themes of individual empowerment, community mobilization, and structural transformation.

Learning: Acquiring Knowledge & Skills

The ripple effects of these initiatives began with learning experiences that equipped participants with critical knowledge and skills. Through LJS, educators gained tools to advocate for equity, navigate complex systems, and implement systemic change. This learning extended beyond theoretical understanding, fostering skills that allowed educators to lead change across districts, unions, and communities. For example, participants learned to incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies, navigate difficult equity-focused conversations, and advocate for curriculum changes that respect and reflect student

diversity. Educators also developed skills to design and facilitate professional development sessions, expanding the reach of equity training to hundreds of colleagues. These skills empowered participants to see the broader connections between their work and the systems shaping education, encouraging active engagement in statewide equity and justice initiatives.

Behavior: Shifting Actions & Practices

This newfound knowledge translated into meaningful changes in behavior, as individuals applied what they learned to transform practices and systems. In classrooms, educators revised grading policies, implemented restorative justice approaches, and created safe spaces for marginalized students, such as affinity groups for middle schoolers or culturally relevant curriculum adaptations. Beyond the classroom, advocacy efforts became more focused and strategic, leading to shifts in how schools and districts operated. Participants influenced district policies, led union advocacy efforts, and initiated equity audits to guide decision-making within their schools and districts. Educators shifted from passively accepting systemic barriers to actively working to dismantle them, often through collaborative efforts that engaged students, parents and families, and colleagues in equity-focused initiatives.

Results: Organizational & Systemic Change

The culmination of these learning and behavior changes led to results affecting organizations, systems, and communities. Districts implemented policy changes, such as inclusive dress codes, equitable disciplinary practices, and hiring processes that align staff demographics with student populations. Union-related advancements included establishing equity-focused leadership cohorts, integrating justice principles into collective bargaining agreements, and increasing transparency in decision-making. Statewide, participants influenced legislative outcomes, secured funding for equity initiatives, and developed frameworks for systemic change, such as state-level LJS programs. These results demonstrate how individual and collective efforts have reshaped policies, systems, and cultures to better serve students and educators alike.

The ripple effects and cross-cutting outcomes illustrate how individual learning and action can lead to broader changes. To further unpack the LJS program outcomes, we now turn to the specific domains where these changes have taken root: systems, practice, union, and policy.



LJS participants lead transformative systems, practice, union, & policy changes.

building on their personal and professional foundations, LJS members channel the expertise and tools gained from the program to pursue and lead systems, practice, union-related, and policy changes.

In our survey of four LJS cohorts, we asked what changes participants had pursued as a result of their participation in the LJS program. The changes were defined as⁶:

- **Systems change:** changes in institutional infrastructure, processes, or procedures; power dynamics; and mindsets that affect a large population. They are intended to improve the functioning and outcomes of the public educational system or other related public systems.
- **Practice change:** changes in day-to-day activities, methods, and procedures within educational settings that improve working and learning experiences, enhance equity and inclusion, and foster better educational outcomes.
- **Union-related change:** changes in collective bargaining agreements, grievance procedures, union membership rights, changes to how the union functions, and/or other organizational or procedural adjustments aimed at improving the working conditions and rights of educators.
- **Policy change:** changes in laws, ordinances, resolutions, mandates, regulations, local school policies, local school board policies, classroom policies, or organizational rules and procedures at the legislative or organizational level.

⁶ Though we provided definitions for each change domain in the Outcome Harvesting Survey, definitions provided may have been interpreted differently by participants. For example, some classified “increased confidence” as a systems change or local classroom efforts as policy changes. This reflects the subjective nature of these terms and the importance of ensuring that LJS participants develop a shared understanding of each term.

	Number of Participants Pursuing the Change	Number of Participants Identifying the Change as Fully Implemented	Number of Participants Reporting Change Impact by Population Size Affected			
			<500	501-1,000	1,001-2,500	More than 2,500
Systems Change	110	8	57	5	9	30
Practice Change	93	9	50	6	8	27
Union Change	76	13	30	7	6	31
Policy Change	60	14	23	4	5	23

Here, we present overarching data that highlights the breadth of change within each domain, supported by case studies that bring these shifts to life. Drawing on interviews with LJS participants and their collaborators, these case studies offer a closer look at the strategies and stories behind the numbers, showcasing how equity-driven work has evolved within diverse educational contexts.

Systems Change

Systems change is a major area of change, with 70% of participants reporting they have led or contributed to such efforts through their involvement in the LJS program. Their systems change efforts most often impacted equity and inclusion policies (70%) decision-making processes (55%), and leadership roles and responsibilities (48%) within schools and school districts. Some examples of the change efforts include revising grading policies, broadening access to gifted programs, creating safe spaces for students, equity audits and strategic plans that embed equity as a guiding principle in decision-making. Educators (79%) and students (77%) emerge as the groups most directly affected by this work. Some efforts reach thousands, with nearly one-third of participants estimating their work has impacted over 2,500 individuals.

This work is rooted in collaboration: 90% of LJS participants pursuing systems change worked closely with colleagues, school boards, and community groups to enact change. Even with a strong collaborative foundation, participants often face barriers. Limited time (57%), resistance from colleagues (49%), and insufficient resources (43%) emerge as the most common challenges for systems change. These obstacles highlight the complexities of systemic change, which often requires navigating entrenched institutional practices, securing buy-in of colleagues and other institutional interest-holders, and coordinating across multiple levels of influence.

Helping to navigate these complexities, LJS provides participants with tools and insights to translate collective efforts into actionable outcomes. Through the program, 81% of participants report gaining a deeper understanding of equity and systemic change. Increased confidence (73%) and improved leadership and planning skills (68%) further empower participants to lead systems change initiatives. These skills are

essential in systems change efforts, where tackling deep-rooted inequities and improving decision-making, policies, and practices demand a clear vision, strong teamwork, and the ability to address challenges and drive effective solutions together.

Participants persist in making meaningful strides and remain optimistic about the future of their change initiatives. Nearly three-quarters believe the changes they initiate are likely or very likely to endure. While this optimism is encouraging, it exists alongside the reality that systemic change unfolds gradually. Currently, 35% of initiatives are in active progress, 25% are ongoing processes with no definitive endpoint, and just 7% are fully implemented. These figures reflect the time and persistence required for meaningful systems transformation.

Disrupting Academic Tracking— A Systems Change Story

A veteran high school social studies teacher in Illinois saw how academic tracking was limiting opportunities, with only 10% of Latino students accessing advanced courses in a school that was nearly 50% students of color. Drawing on his LJS training, he transformed incremental recruitment efforts into systemic change by eliminating freshman tracking entirely and creating an “earned honors” model that opened advanced coursework to all students.

CHANGE LEADER PROFILE

Work Role: High school teacher with 25+ years of experience

Systems Change Role: Initiator of systems change

Location: Mundelein, Illinois

LJS Cohort: Durham, NC

Direct Impact: District-wide elimination of academic tracking system, creating universal access to honors-level curriculum, impacting more than 160,000 students across 19 school districts and resulting in a 30% increase in historically disadvantaged students earning honors credit

The journey began in social studies, where the leader noticed stark demographic disparities while teaching both advanced placement (AP) World History and core classes. “I taught AP World History for many years. And it was white kids. And that’s not our school,” he explains. “As the years went by, I’m like, this does not feel right.” While he had been wrestling with these inequities for some time, it was his experience with LJS that helped him envision and implement more comprehensive solutions. “I was doing work on the topic beforehand, but I really believe the LJS experience helped me to systematize the work and the outcomes and at a much greater level.”

Working with district administration, he researched successful de-tracking models at other schools. The initial implementation required bold action: eliminating both the AP World History and lower-level “Essentials” tracks, replacing them with a unified “Earned Honors World Studies” course. When concerns arose about supporting struggling students, the leader volunteered to teach the most challenging sections himself, demonstrating his commitment to proving the model could work for all students.

Rather than lowering standards, the team developed robust push-in support systems.

Reading specialists and instructional coaches worked directly within classrooms during regular instruction time, providing immediate assistance to both students and teachers as they adapted to the new model. This “push-in” approach meant support staff worked alongside classroom teachers to develop strategies to effectively teach students at different levels within the same classroom, rather than pulling students out for separate interventions. This helped maintain an inclusive environment while ensuring students received needed assistance and teachers gained skills in differentiation. As one instructional coach reflected: *“We wanted to maintain the curriculum, not water it down, but we wanted to be able to support the students in real time.”* The focus remained on maintaining a rigorous curriculum while building in the scaffolding and support needed to make that curriculum accessible to all students.

As evidence of success mounted, the initiative’s influence began to spread beyond its original scope.

The results were striking. *“From the very first year we saw drastic changes,”* the leader recalls. *“The number of Hispanic students [earning honors] went up like 25–30 percent, just because for the first time they were exposed to this opportunity.”* Even more remarkably, in the special “Academic Support Earned Honors” sections containing students in the bottom 10–20% of standardized test scores, about one-third of students earned honors credit each year. The assistant superintendent validated these results: *“We saw that there were kids who would not have been placed in honors who were earning honors. We had a freshman class at that time with 450 kids and 100 of them earned honors and they would have never been in our honors program.”*

As evidence of success mounted, the initiative’s influence began to spread beyond its original scope. After four years of proven results, the model spread to freshman English and Biology. The change wasn’t always smooth—some early implementations moved too quickly, teaching valuable lessons about the importance of clear communication and giving teachers time to understand and adapt to the new approach. Through careful iteration and adjustment, the team developed a model that has continued to expand and evolve. Their approach maintained high standards while dramatically expanding access to advanced coursework, as evidenced by its ongoing adoption across departments and schools.

The impact was clear in student outcomes: **the percentage of students deemed “reading and writing ready” for community college jumped from 73% to 96%.** The ripple effects continued to surface in unexpected ways. The middle school’s Spanish language arts program, which had never offered honors designation, began allowing students to earn honors credit in Spanish—a change that highlighted how tracking had created hidden barriers for multilingual learners. The model’s growth and continued spread suggest its potential for long-term impact.

To scale the work beyond individual schools and encourage sustainability, the leader established the “Bridges of Opportunity” working group, bringing together educators and administrators from multiple districts. **What started with a virtual kickoff event attended by 250 educators has grown into a network of 19 school districts serving over 160,000 students.** The leader also helped create a joint union-administration data committee where respected leaders from both groups analyze results together and provide unified recommendations for improvement.

The leader credits his participation in the LJS program as fundamental to achieving and expanding these changes. *“The power that I experienced in the room at Durham was the power of personal connection,” he reflects. “Just feeling a sense of depth and connection and being in the fight with this group of people was such a transformative experience.”* The program’s systematic approach to leadership development also provided a framework that the leader has since implemented across his state. Illinois has now trained hundreds of educators through LJS cohorts, building a network of change leaders equipped to tackle systemic inequities. *“In my work with our state and national union and the LJS program, I have been exposed to people who think big...They think systematically and they think, we can change a lot of things, so let’s go change them...I’m thinking big. There’s no time to think small.”*

Practice Change

For many educators, creating safe, equitable, and just learning environments begins with transforming the daily routines and interactions that shape learning. Practice changes, pursued by 59% of LJS participants, focus on improving instructional methods, classroom procedures, and management strategies to foster inclusion and better outcomes for students. These changes can become incubators or set the foundation for larger systemic shifts.

At the heart of these efforts is a strong emphasis on equity and inclusion practices, identified by 88% of participants as the focus for practice-related change efforts. Participants lead a range of initiatives, from introducing restorative practices to revising curricula for cultural responsiveness. Many also organized staff training to address implicit biases and promote social-emotional well-being, while others focus on empowering student and staff voices through collaborative platforms.



Similar to systems and policy change, collaboration is a driving force behind practice change efforts: 83% of participants report working closely with others to implement these changes. Given that these practice changes are often focused on classroom settings, students (84%) and educators (80%) are often the groups LJS participants aim to impact with their change efforts.

Additionally, the LJS program continues to play a critical role in equipping participants with the tools and knowledge to navigate this process. It deepens practice-change participants' understanding of equity and systemic change (84%), builds their confidence (75%), and enhances their leadership, planning, and implementation skills (66%). This preparation undergirds important changes for students and educators, with nearly a third of participants estimating their work has directly influenced more than 2,500 people.

Reflecting the nature of practice change being cyclical and evolving rather than a finite process, 39% of participants describe their work as ongoing with no clear endpoint, 31% are actively implementing changes, and 8% are in the early planning stages. Only 9% reached full implementation. This signals that practice changes are dynamic, requiring continuous application and adaptation to address the shifting needs of students, educators, and school communities, ensuring their relevance over time.

While barriers such as lack of time (61%), resistance from colleagues (52%), and limited resources (47%) often slow progress, they do not diminish the resolve of participants. More than half of participants believe their changes are likely to endure and 31% express strong confidence in their long-term viability.

Transforming State Equity Training— A Practice Change Story

A fifth-grade teacher in Wisconsin saw how limited equity training options were leaving educators unprepared to support increasingly diverse student populations. Drawing on her LJS training, she collaborated with fellow participants to transform an initial inspiration into a statewide professional development program that continues to shape new generations of educators.

CHANGE LEADER PROFILE

Work Role: Elementary school teacher with 11 to 20 years of experience

Practice Change Role: Initiator of practice change

Location: Sun Prairie, Wisconsin

LJS Cohort: San Diego, CA

Direct Impact: Statewide transformation of educator professional development through creation of equity training program leading to enhanced culturally responsive teaching practices and reaching 300+ educators and 30+ aspiring teachers across Wisconsin over 4 years

The journey began after completing the LJS training in San Diego, she returned energized but initially uncertain how to create change as the only LJS-trained educator in her district. “I was trying to do equity work in the district...trying to bring about change and educating more

educators, getting our staff members having conversations about race and equity in the schools, [but] it just seemed like it wasn't going anywhere," she recalls.

The breakthrough came through connecting with earlier LJS participants from the Durham, NC cohort. Together, they envisioned bringing the transformative elements of LJS to educators across their state. Rather than simply replicating the national curriculum, they carefully adapted it to address Wisconsin's specific context and challenges. The team focused heavily on self-reflection and personal growth, recognizing that many white educators in their predominantly white teaching force needed space to examine their assumptions and practices. Starting with pilot sessions in individual districts, they refined their approach based on participant feedback. When COVID hit in 2020, they successfully pivoted to virtual delivery while maintaining the program's emphasis on deep reflection and authentic dialogue. A Great Public Schools (GPS) grant from NEA provided crucial seed funding, enabling them to expand offerings statewide.

The program's success led to institutional adoption. **State union leadership not only participated in the training but established a permanent budget line.** As the leader noted, "Our state president and our state secretary treasurer have participated, and now they're going through the levels. I think that's very powerful, having our members see that our state officers are also committed to the equity work." The initiative was renamed WEAC Equity Ambassadors to reflect its Wisconsin-specific evolution while maintaining the core principles of LJS.

The impact on educators has been profound, with approximately 300 participants reporting meaningful changes in their practice. "Some people have gone back into their classrooms and have changed how they've taught by including more culturally responsive

The impact on educators has been profound, with approximately 300 participants reporting meaningful changes in their practice.

resources," the leader explains. The ripple effects touched everything from curriculum choices to family engagement strategies to grading policies.

Most remarkably, the work has begun transforming teacher preparation itself, reaching aspiring educators and addressing equity gaps before teachers even entered the classroom. "Aspiring educators have been overwhelmingly loving this training and so appreciative that they're getting this information from the union." With 30 pre-service teachers already signed up for the next training,

the initiative has created a pipeline of equity-minded educators prepared to serve Wisconsin's diversifying student population.

The leader credits LJS as foundational to these achievements. Beyond the curriculum itself, the program provided a powerful model of adult learning centered on reflection and growth. **LJS created connections with other leaders doing similar work nationwide.** "It was just the right people coming together... I really feel like we had shared ownership of the changes," reflects a collaborator from the LJS Durham cohort. This collaborative spirit continues to drive the program's evolution as it works to offer the training to future school board members,

administrators and eventually community members—creating ever-widening circles of impact in service of educational equity.

Union-related Change

Union-related changes highlight how educators are leveraging collective efforts to enhance union practices, ultimately benefiting educators, students, and communities. About half of respondents (48%) report engaging in union-related changes influenced by their involvement with LJS. These initiatives address a variety of areas, with professional development opportunities (47%) and inclusion practices (43%) being the most common. Examples include training school liaison teams on equitable practices, preparing union leaders to deliver equity-focused presentations, and empowering members to address systemic inequities within union structures.

Educators (89%) and students (79%) are the groups most directly impacted, likely because these initiatives improve the systems and practices shaping their daily experiences. For instance, training and professional development may help educators create more inclusive environments, while efforts to address systemic inequities intend to enhance working conditions for educators and provide more supportive learning spaces for students. Furthermore, 41% of participants estimate that their work has influenced more than 2,500 individuals, suggesting that union-related changes may be far reaching, similar to systems change efforts.

Like all other domains, collaboration is central to union-related change, with 88% of participants working closely with colleagues or other organizations. The LJS program also plays a key role in preparing participants for union-related change efforts. The vast majority of participants reported that it motivated them to take action toward union-related change (75%), provided a deeper understanding of equity and systemic change (71%), or improved leadership, planning, and implementation skills (70%)—essential tools for navigating the complexities of union work.

Union change efforts are not without obstacles, however. Yet again, lack of time (66%) emerges as the most significant barrier, followed by resistance from colleagues (50%) and upper-level leadership (49%). This may be the case because union-related changes often require extensive collaboration, negotiation, and alignment across multiple interest-holders, which may be time-intensive and prone to resistance. Additionally, navigating hierarchical structures and addressing



entrenched practices can create significant challenges, particularly when trying to implement equitable and systemic improvements. These challenges often delay progress, but participants demonstrate resilience: 63% report that, despite delays, they were able to continue making meaningful progress. Only a small number (3%) indicate that barriers significantly hindered their ability to achieve their goals.

A third of participants describe their work as an ongoing process with no clear endpoint, while others report being in active implementation (16%) or early planning stages (14%). A smaller group (17%) has achieved full implementation, highlighting the persistence and effort required to bring these changes to fruition. Although the changes may be ongoing, half of participants said the changes they have led are likely to endure, and 36% are very confident in their long-term viability. This confidence may stem from the careful planning and collaborative approach that participants report as central to these union changes.

Restoring Union Voice— A Union-Related Change Story

A school board member and former teacher in Arizona saw how the removal of union recognition was damaging employee retention and student outcomes. Drawing on her LJS training, she transformed her advocacy from the classroom to the boardroom, implementing policy changes that formally recognized unions as valued partners in district decision-making.

CHANGE LEADER PROFILE

Work Role: School board member, former Middle school teacher with 20+ years of experience

Union Change Role: Initiator of union-related change

Location: Scottsdale, Arizona

LJS Cohort: Washington, DC

Direct Impact: District-wide policy formalizing union recognition in district decisions, impacting more than 22,000 students in 29 schools, educators, school administrators and district officials, resulting in a improved labor-management partnership, improved employee retention, competitive salaries, and enhanced recruitment

The journey began with a crisis. A superintendent had unilaterally stripped away union recognition and thrown out long standing employment agreements, triggering a mass exodus of experienced educators, destabilizing programs, disrupting continuity, and ultimately harming student learning opportunities.

The leader made the strategic decision to retire from teaching and run for school board, where she could effect systemic change through policy. She built a broad coalition, organizing community meetings at local churches where parents, teachers, and residents could share their experiences and concerns. The leader worked methodically to build support, meeting individually with current and prospective board members to help them understand that supporting teachers and students wasn't an either/or proposition. *"When we talk about students being important, we need to include, not exclude, the employees being just as important," she explains. "Without the employees, we're not in the business of helping our students because there's no one to work with them."*

After winning the election, she moved quickly to draft and pass a policy formally recognizing three employee associations—for teachers, administrators, and classified staff. The policy institutionalized release time for association leadership to participate in decision-making and established interest-based negotiation processes for contracts. Most significantly, the change created a foundation for broader reforms around student equity—from revising discriminatory dress codes to implementing mental health supports. By giving employees a voice in decisions, the policy enabled the kind of collaborative problem-solving needed to tackle systemic barriers facing students.

The impact of restored union voice created ripple effects throughout the district.

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A new Student Advisory Board brought youth perspectives into decision-making, while parent organizations began regularly including union leaders in their meetings and community outreach. The leader helped establish inter-district working groups to share practices around labor-management collaboration. The restored relationships had concrete impacts: improved employee retention, more competitive salaries, and enhanced recruitment of qualified staff. As one board member observed: "The salaries have become much more competitive compared to our peer districts and it has helped [create] a perception that our school district is more friendly to teachers. As a result, we haven't had the same issues with hiring as some school districts have had...It's helped mitigate against and insulate the district from some of the challenges of finding highly qualified teachers...The foundation laid originally with that policy that recognized the three employee associations buffers against turnover and ultimately [has] a positive effect on students." But perhaps most importantly, it demonstrated how strong labor-management partnerships can drive positive change for an entire educational community.

The LJS program played a pivotal role in helping the leader transform traditional union advocacy into effective governance. The continuous learning opportunities helped her navigate complex labor-management dynamics and communicate effectively with diverse interest-holders. The training proved especially valuable for public speaking and media engagement during contentious board meetings. **Most importantly, LJS connected her with other leaders working to strengthen educator voice in their communities.** These relationships provided both practical strategies and emotional sustenance during difficult fights.

“Sitting in a room full of people from different parts of our nation and hearing what they were going through...that was something that was very important to me. Not just feeling like we were outliers, but that we were actually experiencing similar things in our local school district.”

The program’s emphasis on systemic change helped her see how restoring union rights could catalyze broader improvements throughout the district. This broader perspective continues to inform her work expanding labor-management collaboration beyond individual school systems to county-level advocacy.

Policy Change

Policy change may have been the least common domain of work among LJS participants, with 38% pursuing efforts in this area, but its breadth tells a different story. Much of this work reflects a localized focus, with the majority of changes concentrated at the district level (67%), where educators may have seen themselves having the most direct influence. Others extended their efforts to organizational settings (30%) and city or town policy (12%). A notable 35% of participants took their advocacy to the state level, targeting broader systemic challenges.

These efforts tackled diverse and pressing issues, focusing on equity and inclusion for students (70%) and teachers or staff (63%), and shifting decision-making processes (52%). Participants revised dress codes to reflect gender inclusivity, advocated for restorative justice, and established alternative high schools to provide equitable access to programming. The intended beneficiaries of these policy changes were equally diverse. Educators (80%) and students (73%) were central to the work, but participants also sought to impact support staff (40%), school administrators (35%), and parents and families (28%). These changes aim to create environments where all interest-holders feel valued and supported.

As with any transformative work, challenges emerged. Lack of time was the most common barrier, cited by 62% of participants, followed by resistance from colleagues (48%) and insufficient resources (43%). While 27% reported significant delays due to these barriers, nearly half (48%) were able to continue making meaningful progress. Collaboration proved essential, with 83% of participants working alongside colleagues or other organizations. The LJS program played a pivotal role, deepening participants’ understanding of equity (73%), boosting their confidence to lead change (70%), and motivating participants to turn ideas into action (68%).

The gradual nature of policy change is reflected in its implementation status. While 23% of efforts have been fully realized, others remain ongoing (22%) or are in the early stages of planning and implementation (20%). Despite this, the outlook is promising: **77% of participants believe their policy changes are likely or very likely to endure over time.**

Transforming Teacher Evaluation— A Policy Change Story

A local union leader in Idaho saw how flawed evaluation policies were limiting educators' career advancement and compensation. Drawing on her LJS training, she transformed a personal advocacy success into district-wide policy reform that expanded opportunities for educators.

CHANGE LEADER PROFILE

Work Role: Local union leader with 20+ years in education

Policy Change Role: Initiator of policy change

Location: Burley, Idaho

LJS Cohort: San Diego, CA

Direct Impact: District-wide policy affecting more than 2,500 students, educators, school administrators, support staff, and school district officials across 18 district buildings, resulting in an average salary increase of \$2,000 per qualifying teacher

The leader's journey began during the 2020 pandemic when she noticed a critical gap in teacher evaluation practices and its impacts on educator's career advancement. "When we received our evaluations at the end of that school year, I actually went back and advocated for myself as to why one of my domains should be changed," she explains. "I provided data and artifacts for that change with my administrator who agreed and made the change on my evaluation." **This personal success revealed a broader systemic issue: many educators had not been informed of how their evaluations affected their career advancement and compensation.**

Working with her leadership team, she analyzed existing policies and developed recommendations for change. The superintendent, a former association member herself, proved receptive to reform. Beyond just allowing appeals, they secured mandatory training for all administrators on using the Danielson Framework effectively. **The initiative gained momentum as word spread of its impact.**

As her co-president recalls: "Teachers have friends at other buildings. They would hear that someone was able to go in with their administrator and redo their evaluation, which led to them achieving that rung on the advanced placement...At the very first workday before the school year started, there were about 13 teachers from a junior high—they tried showing their data and artifacts. There were at least six of them that were able to be moved on that salary rung to get that increase."

Most significantly, the change was codified into district policy, establishing formal procedures that remain in place regardless of administrative turnover. The policy's impact grew through several key developments:

- Creation of formal appeals process for evaluation changes
- Establishment of standardized administrator training requirements
- Expansion of recognized leadership roles to include union building representatives
- Development of peer support systems for documentation
- Implementation of three-year lookback period for evaluation reviews

The initiative's success led to the leader becoming an LJS facilitator herself, training new advocates across the state. In 2022, she received one of the state association's awards for membership recruiter of the year. She regularly participates in state lobby days, building relationships with legislators and demonstrating how local policy changes can drive systemic reform. Through consistent networking and advocacy, she's helping expand the program's impact for the next generation of leaders.

The leader credits LJS as fundamental to achieving these changes. *"All the elements of LJS helped in being able to form those lines of communication and developing the relationships."* Beyond specific tools, the program transformed her approach to leadership: *"Having all of those tools and experiences that I've acquired through LJS...has helped me in building...that confidence and that ability to be able to actively listen and understand other perspectives."* This transformation in leadership approach not only enabled the policy change but continues to multiply its impact as she trains new leaders across the state.



The Bigger Picture: What We're Learning

the LJS program offers a unique lens into the power of leadership development and equity-driven leadership in education. Through this evaluation, a compelling narrative has emerged that highlights both the successes and the complexities of implementing systemic change in diverse educational contexts.

Amplifying Momentum for Change

***** LJS participants are not newcomers to leading change efforts. Many come into the program as seasoned educators already committed to addressing disparities in their schools and communities. Yet, LJS appears to act as a catalyst—transforming intentions into impactful actions. Participants consistently reported an increased sense of motivation and expanded reach for their change efforts. This program enhances their confidence, deepens their understanding of systemic inequities, and equips them with the tools to lead initiatives that ripple across schools, districts, and states.

Diverse Contexts, Shared Commitment

The program's reach spans states with more progressive education systems like New Jersey and Connecticut and more conservative landscapes like Texas and Florida. This diversity underscores a vital takeaway: **no matter the policy environment, LJS participants find ways to navigate barriers and advocate for equity.** It's notable that a significant proportion of participants are from states with lower educational quality rankings, suggesting that the program may play a crucial role in areas where equity gaps are most pronounced.

Flexing, Not Folding

Barriers to change illuminate the deeply entrenched challenges within educational systems, revealing not only the obstacles participants face but also the broader dynamics of equity work. Time constraints, resistance from colleagues, and resource shortages emerged as the most common obstacles across all types of change efforts, underscoring the persistent tension between ambition and capacity—participants are striving to reshape systems that often lack the flexibility or resources to accommodate the changes.

Resistance from upper-level leadership was a particularly pronounced barrier in practice and union-related changes. In practice changes, where participants sought to implement initiatives like culturally responsive teaching or restorative justice, leadership resistance could stem from various factors. It may reflect competing priorities, limited resources to devote to the changes, deeply rooted traditions or beliefs about pedagogy, or hesitancy to advocate for the initiative with their own higher-ups. Union changes may challenge institutional power dynamics, budget constraints, or broader organizational goals. Participants working to shift contract negotiations, decision-making structures, or professional development policies may encounter pushback from those accustomed to traditional hierarchies, highlighting the friction that can arise when grassroots advocacy confronts established systems.

What we're learning from these barriers is that equity work is inherently iterative. Participants often described their efforts as ongoing, with no definitive endpoint—a reflection of the deeply entrenched inequities they are working to address. Whether working to shift practices or influence union policies, participants are not just confronting logistical obstacles—they are engaging with broader cultural and structural dynamics that require persistence, creativity, and a willingness to navigate conflict.

Sustaining Impact Beyond the Program

One of the most compelling insights from the data is the optimism participants express about the sustainability of their efforts. Whether tackling systems-level inequities, driving policy reform, or transforming classroom practices, participants overwhelmingly believe their work has the potential to endure and create lasting change.

Participants continuously highlight the program's role in deepening their understanding of equity and systemic change, improving their skills in leadership, planning, and implementation; and bolstering their professional networks. Access to a network of other educators participating in LJS, especially, act as a source of inspiration, collaboration, and accountability, enabling participants to advance change efforts with other LJS participants, navigate challenges, and maintain momentum.

This growing network continues to expand its reach, with participants working to replicate and adapt LJS in new contexts.

This growing network continues to expand its reach, with participants working to replicate and adapt LJS in new contexts. Replications of the program in states like Illinois and Wisconsin represent an evolution of the program's reach. In Illinois, an adapted form of LJS has grown into a multi-tiered initiative that equips educators across the state to lead systemic equity efforts, influencing union strategies and statewide

professional development events. Wisconsin's replication and adaptation has focused on embedding culturally responsive teaching practices and addressing workforce diversity, aligning with local priorities to tackle equity challenges. These replications signal the program's sustainability beyond its original cohorts. By adapting LJS to meet the needs of different contexts, the program's influence persists long after the initial training ends. Local ownership of the program has allowed educators to broaden the scope of change efforts and integrate LJS principles into ongoing professional development. This sustains the program and amplifies its impact.



A Vision for Growth & Sustainability

the LJS program operates within a dynamic educational and organizational landscape, requiring adaptability to sustain its momentum. This section explores how the program's alignment with NEA's mission, emphasis on educator-driven change, and potential for expanded partnerships contribute to its long-term sustainability.

The LJS program aligns with evolving NEA priorities.

The LJS program is designed to remain adaptable within a shifting political and organizational landscape while maintaining alignment with NEA's evolving priorities. By focusing on equity, advocacy, and leadership development, the program equips educators with the tools and knowledge to address systemic inequities in education. LJS directly supports NEA's mission by empowering education professionals to lead change across schools, policies, unions, and broader educational systems. Through its emphasis on educator-driven programming, LJS ensures that participants have the flexibility to implement initiatives that meet their specific contexts while upholding NEA's broader commitment to equitable education. The program also reinforces long-term strategic outcomes by fostering educator networks that sustain ongoing efforts to improve school communities. This grassroots, participant-centered approach enhances both the program's relevance and its appeal to funders who prioritize autonomy and individualized impact. LJS remains a key driver of equity and advocacy for NEA, ensuring that its contributions to educational leadership persist even as short-term goals and external conditions evolve.

Clear metrics & targets can help measure & track changes over time.

To drive meaningful progress, LJS and the Leadership Team can benefit from setting clear targets that align with its broader vision for equity-focused leadership and systemic change. These targets could be structured using the Kirkpatrick model, focusing on the four interconnected levels: reaction, learning, behavior, and results.

At the **reaction level**, targets could measure participant satisfaction and perceived value of the program, ensuring that LJS continues to resonate and inspire. At the **learning level**, they could focus on knowledge acquisition and skill development, such as increasing participants' confidence in addressing equity issues

or understanding systemic change. At the **behavior level**, targets could track how participants apply what they've learned—such as leading change efforts, building collaborations, or influencing policies. Finally, at the **results level**, LJS can document tangible outcomes like policy changes or shifts in organizational practices.

Metrics play a critical role in tracking progress toward these targets. They guide data collection efforts and can provide a framework for tools like “report cards” or static dashboards, which can visually summarize and communicate program performance and outcomes on a regular basis.

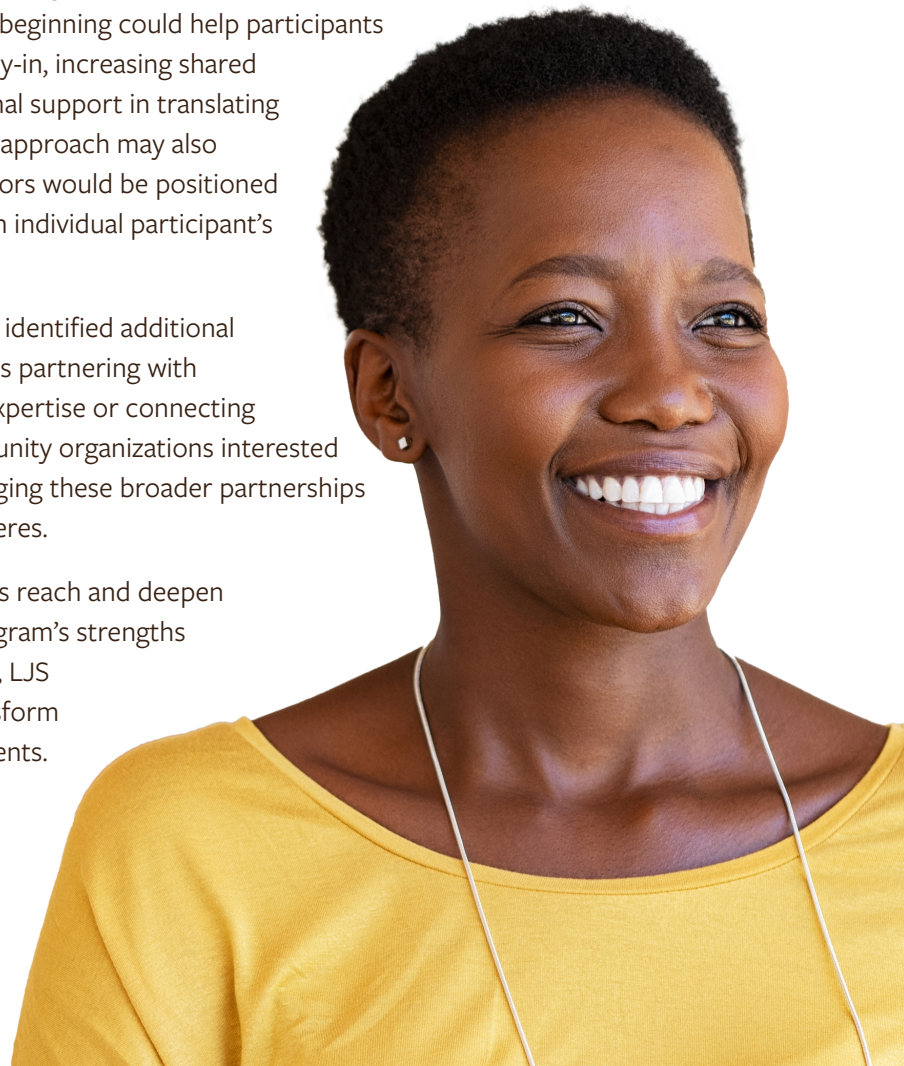
LJS can further expand its reach & deepen its impact.

Participants also emphasized the value of the resources and support provided by LJS, including the curriculum, robust networking opportunities, and continued leadership development. Expanding the availability of these offerings could further enhance the program's impact. Improved communication between LJS and local union leaders was suggested as a way to increase awareness and accessibility of the program.

To further strengthen the impact of LJS and address common challenges faced by participants, the program could consider incorporating a collaborator model as part of its design. Collaborators—such as a trusted colleague, mentor, or organizational partner—could serve as thought partners, accountability partners, and key allies in implementing change efforts within participants' schools, districts, or unions. Many participants identified resistance from colleagues and leadership as a barrier to progress. Engaging a collaborator from the beginning could help participants navigate these challenges by fostering early buy-in, increasing shared ownership of initiatives, and providing additional support in translating program learning into actionable change. This approach may also enhance long-term sustainability, as collaborators would be positioned to help continue and expand efforts beyond an individual participant's direct involvement with LJS.

Beyond scaling the core program, participants identified additional avenues for LJS to expand its influence, such as partnering with universities to share additional research and expertise or connecting with local government, businesses, and community organizations interested in supporting education equity efforts. Leveraging these broader partnerships could help LJS extend its impact into new spheres.

Overall, LJS has significant potential to grow its reach and deepen its impact. By thoughtfully building on the program's strengths and exploring new collaborative opportunities, LJS can continue to empower educators and transform educational systems for the benefit of all students.





Conclusion

the evaluation of the Leaders for Just Schools program highlights outcomes in equipping educators with the tools, confidence, and networks to advance equity-driven change in schools, districts, and unions. Participants leverage their LJS experiences to initiate and sustain transformative efforts, leading to shifts in decision-making structures, educational practices, and systemic policies. The program's national reach and appeal to seasoned educators reinforce its role as a catalyst for leadership development and equity-focused action.

Despite its successes, LJS participants face challenges in navigating institutional resistance, resource constraints, and the long timelines required for systemic change. These barriers underscore the complexity of educational equity work and emphasize the need for sustained collaboration, strategic support, and programmatic adaptability. Recommendations such as incorporating a collaborator model, enhancing program metrics, and expanding strategic partnerships could further strengthen LJS's success and long-term sustainability.

Looking ahead, the LJS program is well-positioned to build on its strengths and deepen its influence. By continuing to align with NEA's evolving priorities, maintaining its commitment to educator-driven leadership, and fostering networks that sustain change beyond the program, LJS can expand its influence in shaping more just and equitable educational systems. Through ongoing refinement and investment, LJS can continue to empower educators to drive meaningful, lasting transformation in their schools and communities.

