



SABES Program Support Professional
Development Center



WORLD EDUCATION



Taking Action: Practical Models of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Adult Education

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Julie's Family Learning Program*
Lawrence Public Schools Adult Learning Center
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Plymouth Public Library Literacy Program*
Springfield Technical Community College Adult Learning Center
UMass Dartmouth Workers' Education Program

* Staff from these programs were interviewed for this report.

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Introduction

For adult education practitioners and programs, supporting adult learners can and should include addressing the multiple and intersecting inequities and disparities that impact the learning and lives of the students we serve. Particularly since 2020, programs have sought to understand and address educational, social, and economic disparities through the lens of anti-racism and to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives to better serve their students and communities. But what, actually, does DEI mean in the context of adult education? What do and could DEI initiatives look like, and how might they impact students' experiences and outcomes?

From 2020 to 2022, staff from 14 Massachusetts adult education programs participated in a sustained professional development (PD) opportunity that asked them to evaluate their programs; identify areas where changes could make their programs more welcoming and equitable; and create a plan to make manageable, sustainable changes to that end. This report documents their work and the lessons they learned along the way.

In sharing this project summary report with the field, we are lifting up the work these programs have done as models for what DEI initiatives could look like in adult education programs. We hope that this will serve as inspiration for practitioners and programs looking for a foothold to begin to address the disparities and inequities that impact the adult learners they serve, and in so doing make their programs more welcoming and equitable places where all students might see themselves as part of a community of learners and find the specific resources and supports that they need to achieve their goals.



Project Summary

PROJECT ORIGINS AND GOALS

In 2020, the [SABES Program Support PD Center](#) (PSPDC) sat down to build PD offerings and resources that would help adult education programs address the systemic inequities and racial disparities that we were acknowledging in the wake of George Floyd's murder. While such work is and has been part of the ongoing practice of many adult educators and programs, this moment compelled us and others to take a more cohesive and systemic approach to addressing racism and fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion within adult education.

The PD development and implementation process was led by consultant and subject matter expert Dr. Carmine Stewart in close collaboration with PSPDC staff, working within a priority that was established and funded by the Adult and Community Learning Services unit (ACLS) of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Drawing on the [Massachusetts Adult Education Standards for High Quality Professional Development](#) (ACLS & SABES) and the concepts outlined in *Effective Teacher Professional Development* (Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, 2017), we designed a sustained PD opportunity that would guide Massachusetts adult education programs in examining program policies and practices for biases and assumptions about who students are and what they need, and to use those learnings to create meaningful, sustainable changes towards making programs more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. While the PD was meant to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in a broad sense, some programs took a specifically anti-racist lens in evaluating their programs.

In Massachusetts, this program-level work sits within ACLS's mission to ensure equitable access for all. In alignment with this mission, ACLS has established DEI as a priority for every partner throughout the Massachusetts adult education system. This important emphasis is intended to address the systemic barriers to "the achievement of goals and aspirations" that many adult learners face (ACLS, 2022).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

From 2020 to 2022, two cohorts of MA adult education practitioners signed up to complete this PD endeavor, entitled *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Adult Education Programs: Program Assessment and Planning*. Participants were asked to attend as program-based teams that, depending on the program, included program directors, instructors, and advisors. Participants from a total of 14 programs completed the process between the two years. Please see "Acknowledgments" for a list of participating programs.

Program teams followed this basic structure:

1. After an initial webinar exploring identity and bias and examples of how those might show up in the context of an adult education program, each program team was asked to view their program through the lens of different stakeholder groups (including students, program alumni, staff, board members, and community members) using program assessment surveys and focus groups.
2. Once the program assessment was completed, key program staff came together to discuss the results and identify three meaningful, manageable objectives they wanted to address, and completed coaching calls with the facilitator. Once the coaching call was complete, programs began working on their action plans.
3. In the final wrap-up webinar, each team was asked to share their process with others, focusing on: key findings from their assessment, goals they identified based on the assessment results, any progress already made toward these goals, and next steps they would be taking to continue the work.

Programs had 4-5 months to assess, plan, and implement in the first two phases; the entire process lasted about 6-7 months for each cohort. During this time, program teams had ongoing access to guidance, support, and feedback from the PSPDC facilitators and each other. Facilitators supplied the program assessment survey and focus group questions that programs used.

PROGRAM EVALUATION PROCESS

1. Identify key partners and collaborators to participate
2. Distribute survey
3. Conduct focus groups with students and other stakeholders
4. Review and analyze results
5. Identify three meaningful action steps

Of the programs that participated, 6 were interviewed for this piece between 4 and 16 months after presenting their project to their cohorts. (Please see the Appendix for profiles of these programs.) The findings in this report result from analysis of qualitative data collected from participant program teams through interviews and focus groups. Data were then coded, analyzed, summarized, and validated through feedback from the participants. We present these common themes that emerged during this process according to four areas of inquiry:

1. Program Motivations
2. Project Outcomes
3. Considerations for Effective Practice
4. Common Challenges

AREAS OF WORK: WHERE PROGRAMS CHOSE TO TAKE ACTION

Each program created its own action plan with one or more areas of work in response to what they found in their evaluation. Some themes common to several programs' action plans included:

AREA OF WORK	EXAMPLES
Address student representation in program materials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include photos of current students in outreach materials • Make materials available in main languages spoken by students • Create welcome videos featuring current students speaking to new students in their native language
Evaluate the accessibility and connectivity of intake and orientation processes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask more open-ended questions about students' needs • Expand orientation period to one week to allow for more thorough onboarding and relationship-building • Invite current students to speak with groups or individuals during orientation • Reevaluate what program policies communicate about the program and how they support students, for example: <i>[We looked at] a list of sample program rules: it was full of bold, all caps, exclamation points. It sounded very threatening and intimidating. How often does our language sound like that to a student who doesn't yet speak English? I want [our program] to be a place where students can go for help and not just... get slammed down with rules.</i> - SHIRLEY DOAN
Address student representation in curriculum.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplement Eurocentric history and ELA textbooks with texts highlighting Black, indigenous, and immigrant perspectives
Consider students' experiences of physical spaces.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place a tablet at the main entrance to support communication with new students • Place a screen with rotating announcements and student photos at the the main entrance • Renovate reception area with brightly-colored paint, comfortable furniture, and natural lighting • Move reception desk closer to the entrance so staff can greet students immediately

Implement flexible options for students to attend class.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow for any student to attend class virtually at any time • Implement a flipped classroom model • Switch to managed enrollment to reduce turnover and strengthen the relationship-building component of students' orientation and first weeks of class
Address digital needs and inequities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use QR codes to help students get what they need faster and reduce frustration • Distribute free hotspots, computers, and other resources
Strengthen access to learning accommodations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen community relationships to understand and access accommodations

Findings

We asked staff from each of the six programs that participated in this piece about their experience and changes observed at their programs since participating in this project. While the contexts, scope of work, and approaches varied from program to program, all programs reported generally positive outcomes and shared several key themes in the challenges they faced. The changes that are reported below were all shared by two or more programs.

PROGRAM MOTIVATIONS

Programs were first asked what motivated them to participate in the project and what they hoped to get out of the experience. Programs were most aligned in their responses on this matter and their responses included the following themes:

Align services to program and staff values.

Nearly all program staff shared that they participated because they wanted to make sure that their programming reflected their or their program's values and that they were meeting student needs. Most participants had been attending other DEI trainings and discussing DEI, and wanted support in translating theory to practice. One program was at the beginning of a strategic planning process and wanted to lift up student voice and identify DEI goals within that process.

*I think students think we want them to speak English all day and just celebrate American holidays, but **we need to show them we value their language, their traditions, everything they bring with them.** We don't want to have this deficit perspective where we just focus on what students lack or what they don't know.*

- ELISE KIGNER

Better understand and meet student needs.

Programs were particularly interested in understanding how to meet students' unique needs as learners and how to create a sense of belonging and safety. One program, for example, wanted to make sure it wasn't furthering trauma that many students had experienced in other educational settings:

We don't want to make any excuse for our students to leave the program. This is about their future. They've already had experiences that weren't positive in the past, so the first thing that comes along that isn't positive, they're going to take it as a reason to run away. I don't want staff or the curriculum or the way the building looks to be that reason.

- ANNA FERNANDEZ-BUEHRENS

Others also sought to meet physical or non-academic needs, such as food or technology support. One program that is part of a K-12 school district found in its assessment that students who had recently left the K-12 system were frustrated with the lack of resources, services, and information provided to them as adult learners, and used that information to advocate for additional resources.

Support staff development.

Programs also saw this as an opportunity for staff to deepen their understanding of DEI principles and find meaningful ways to incorporate them into their work. Staff at one program were looking for guidance on how to add complexity to the curriculum in a way that reflects and references students' identities, experiences, and histories.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

All programs reported that positive changes occurred as a result of the work they did during and beyond this project. Participants identified specific changes that touched on the following themes:

Changes in student attitudes.

Nearly all programs shared that they had seen a shift in the way students engaged with the program, with staff, and with each other. Staff at two programs noted that students seemed to feel safer in opening up in the classroom and were more willing to talk about their needs. Other programs noted that students seemed more positive or optimistic overall, and that this was palpable in and out of the classroom. One participant shared:

*There is a different energy... You can see it when they come out of class: it feels more like a school. Students are talking to each other, sharing stories. There's a more positive energy when people come into the building. ***It's a welcoming place to be.****

- KRISTEN D'AVOLIO

Changes in staff attitudes.

Most programs identified positive changes in staff attitudes: staff were "more positive," "talking in more affirming ways" about students, and "more open-minded." One participant shared that she and her

colleagues had begun thinking and talking about students in ways that were more asset-driven and affirming. Another participant noted that staff had begun to approach absences with a more collaborative attitude, asking questions instead of assuming that students just “didn’t want to be there.” Another shared that colleagues who had not participated in the project had begun to ask for unconscious bias training.

More one-on-one time with students.

Two programs noted that the systems they implemented have freed up staff time to work one-on-one with students. One program noted that their work to implement a student portal allowed students to access their own schedules and grades, freeing up staff time for individual outreach around absences and making their workload feel more manageable, sustainable, meaningful, and effective.

They need to know that people are paying attention. It builds a connection where students [believe] “someone cares about me outside of my family.”
It becomes a place for them to be themselves and not just a worker or a parent: *here they get to be a student... they can be themselves and have their own identity.*

- KRISTEN D'AVOLIO

Changes in hiring practices.

One program began to evaluate candidates based on their desire to center equity and relationships with students in their work, leading to more staff contributing to DEI work. Another began promoting their students as potential employees to other departments within their organization, and have since seen multiple alumni hired at their organization.

CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

When asked what about the process worked for them, programs shared elements of PD design and approaches to the work that supported the effective and sustainable implementation of their action plans, as well as factors that they thought would contribute to the long-term sustainability and growth of DEI work within their programs. Those factors included:

Treating the work as a framework, rather than a task.

Participants shared that they saw or had come to see DEI as a lens or framework through which to approach all of their work, rather than a task to be completed. Treating DEI in this way helped programs to be more expansive in their projects: several completed more work than anticipated, and most have continued to evaluate and adapt different parts of their programs (see “Sustaining and Expand the Work”). One participant shared:

*The issue with DEI is that so many people have done the training or checklist item and then it kind of ends there. Really, it's our mindset that has to change: **the work isn't done until we've all changed our minds in how we approach [it].***

- LEAH GREGORY

Trusting relationships between and among students and staff.

Effective DEI work requires vulnerability and is deeply relational: students must be able to trust that their experiences and feedback will be heard and treated with care. At some programs, students were only willing to open up with staff they trusted, or once programs had demonstrated that they were implementing student feedback. Several participants also pointed to trust in each other as an important factor in their ability to navigate difficult conversations and decisions.

Conversations with students.

Nearly all of the programs that were interviewed found that having focus groups and/or one-on-one conversations—in addition to the surveys that were part of the evaluation tool—were key to obtaining meaningful, constructive feedback. Several programs felt that having a staff member with a strong relationship with students or someone who students could relate to lead the conversations led to more productive conversations.

A lot of the feedback from students was because of the facilitators.

Sam and Miss Isabella [are] more on peer with the students, so they could communicate and relate in different [ways] and the students were more willing to open up.

- WINSLOW HOLMAN



Access to structure and accountability.

With many competing demands on their time, participants found that having a structure and timeline made the project feel more manageable, and that access to tools and models for identifying and addressing areas of work made it more approachable. Working as part of a cohort and having concrete deliverables (such as the final presentation) created accountability, keeping participants on track and preventing the work from falling to the bottom of a lengthy to-do list.

Access to practical and contextualized guidance.

Programs found that the format of the PD—including ample time for program teams to work together, program-based coaching, and opportunities to talk with and learn from other programs—allowed for guidance and feedback that was tailored to their unique staff, students, policies, and practices. This made the PD feel “intimate” (according to one participant). Participants also focused on the practical, adaptable nature of the content and materials, which were developed by adult educators and explicitly for adult education programs, as a key feature that allowed them to quickly grasp key concepts and apply them to their practice.

Institutional support.

Within their institutions, programs were divided: some felt that having the support of their colleagues and institutional leaders was very important or essential to the success of their work; others felt that it was more important to have the support of a few colleagues who are very closely aligned in terms of values and objectives. This difference points to a deeper philosophical divide that is discussed under “Advice for Programs Considering DEI Initiatives.”

COMMON CHALLENGES

In discussing their work, programs identified a number of common challenges, including:

Leading for and through change.

Navigating institutional change can be challenging even when an entire team agrees that the change is valuable, important, or necessary. Even for programs where the majority or entirety of staff agreed with the project goals, there were still challenging conversations to be had to navigate differing points of view and to come to agreement on what to prioritize or how best to move forward. Many participants found that navigating these conversations required or was made much easier by collaborative approaches to leadership and by relationships between and among staff and students that were grounded in trust and mutual accountability.

STRATEGIES FOR LEADING FOR AND THROUGH CHANGE:

- Adopting a mindset that is flexible, open, and eager to learn
- Prioritizing building relationships and trust between and amongst staff and students
- Making time for important conversations
- Including as many voices as possible: consider different identities and roles within and outside of the program
- Approaching disagreements and difficult conversations from a place of curiosity

Resistance from colleagues and institutional leadership.

While most participants spoke highly of supportive colleagues and leadership, a few experienced indifference and/or pushback in implementing their DEI projects. Those who pushed back found the work unimportant or antithetical to how they understood the purpose of the program. Others were initially eager or willing, but stopped participating as time went on.

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING RESISTANCE:

- Accepting that some colleagues that may not be eager or willing to participate
- Reframing the work to make it feel more familiar (e.g. “cultural competence” instead of “DEI”)
- Adding to existing work, rather than replacing them (e.g. adding more representative photos and art to a space instead of replacing work that colleagues and students were attached to)
- Focusing on collaboration with colleagues who are aligned with the values and goals of the work, rather than seeking to convince unsupportive colleagues
- Focusing on projects that don’t require outside support or approval, i.e. within one’s own area of work

Limitations on feedback.

Most programs found that surveys were helpful, but ultimately limited in their scope and ability to pinpoint issues and their causes. Focus groups and conversations allowed for more clarity and depth, but required trust, a shared language, and a shared understanding of key DEI concepts. Some programs found that students felt uncomfortable sharing feedback in any format for a variety of reasons, including power imbalances and personal or cultural beliefs about the appropriateness or necessity of student feedback.

It’s not simple or easy to get feedback from students. *We asked about our website thinking it would help evaluate our DEI work and students all said everything was great. A simple survey doesn’t yield much substantial feedback that can inform planning.*

- ELISE KIGNER

One program noted that a practice of regularly surveying students (begun during the 2020 switch to remote learning, prior to this project) and pointing to their feedback when announcing changes was effective for helping students understand that their comments were truly valued. They pointed to a growing number of critical remarks as evidence of growing trust and honesty:

*...what they say in those surveys might not be 100% true but we’ve gotten some pretty critical remarks so ***I’m hoping that’s a push towards honesty.****

- SHIRLEY DOAN

STRATEGIES FOR GATHERING MORE MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK:

- Engaging students during class time
- Using actual program materials (e.g. program flyers or websites) to elicit feedback
- Frequent surveys with open-ended questions
- Balancing surveys with focus groups and informal conversations
- Building trusting relationships between staff and students, and/or leveraging existing relationships between students and staff (or representatives, such as alumni) with high levels of trust
- Demonstrating the value of feedback by naming it as the reason for program-wide decisions

Limited resources, especially time and funding.

DEI work is a call to question and re-think fundamental assumptions about why and how programs work with adult learners: it is all-encompassing and bigger than any individual program or project. Like many adult education programs, most participating programs are run by a small staff of predominantly part-time employees with significant demands on their time, attention, and budgets. While several programs found the project to be less demanding than expected and felt that the changes they made were self-sustaining, many participants shared that the learning, planning, and execution that they did happened above and beyond their regular responsibilities and that continuing to prioritize the work requires additional investment within their programs and the adult education system as a whole.

STRATEGIES FOR MAKING THE WORK SUSTAINABLE:

- Starting with smaller, more manageable pieces of work
- Incorporating the work into standing all-staff meetings
- Celebrating accomplishments, however small
- System-level funding for DEI initiatives

Sustaining and Expanding the Work

Meaningful DEI change takes intention, planning, structure, and time. Getting into the habit of using a DEI lens for all program planning and decisions is a critical first step. As one participant said:

*It was sort of funny just focusing on orientation because... **DEI is something we need to keep in mind in everything we do, from teachers to admin staff, registration, orientation**: it's more like a mindset and something we always need to keep checking ourselves on, conversations we need to continue to have as staff.*

- ELISE KIGNER

All of the participants who were interviewed are actively working on new DEI goals and projects or planning to do so, including:

Create or expand opportunities for student leadership.

About half of programs interviewed are planning to create or expand a student council or other student body, such as a book club or literary magazine, as a way to lift up student voice and/or integrate students into program-level decision-making processes.

Diversify staff.

Two programs are working on hiring practices, with an aim of hiring staff who share racial identities or native languages with students. Staff at one program pointed out that Black students and students of color often feel more comfortable with and seek out Black staff members because students feel that they will be better able to understand their experiences. The program has tried to diversify its staff racially without much success; as an interim step, they have begun to look at other forms of diversity (place of origin, life experiences, interests) and a commitment to DEI as key qualifications.

*When you are interviewing a student and the first question she asks is **"are you the only person in this building that looks like me?"**, that shows you that something has to be done. We're working on that.*

- WINSLOW HOLMAN

Several programs talked about the need for more staff who speak the same languages as students. One program in particular shared that translation and interpretation tends to fall to the same small group of staff in the program who speak the same language as students: they would like to hire more

staff members who can work in students' languages and/or plan for in-house or contracted professional translation and interpretation services.

*We want to have all these things translated but the burden of that often falls just on [the same group of people] and it's not fair. **We want to make all these things accessible and that's great but it's not fair that it's just piled on the same people.***

- ELISE KIGNER

Address barriers to student agency.

Many programs found that this work helped them better understand student needs and are continuing to work to address those. Two programs are now working to centralize student information and relevant community and learning resources to help students access what they need quickly, easily, and independently. Another program is working to make sure that all materials (flyers, forms, program policies, etc.) are available in languages most commonly spoken by students to make sure that all students feel welcome and have the information they need to make informed decisions. Another program is working to address students' everyday needs by seeking out a washer and dryer, community fridge, and shower.

Draft a mission, vision, and values statement.

One program is focusing on creating a mission, vision, and values statement, which would be the first in its institution's history and would help solidify and communicate the organization's commitment to equity, justice, and meeting the unique needs of adult learners.

Continue building trust and relationships with students.

Several programs highlighted the deeply relational nature of DEI work, and the importance and value of building trusting relationships with students. One program is focusing on continuing to build these relationships as a key strategy for understanding and addressing students' experiences and needs.

Participants' Advice for Programs Considering DEI Initiatives

While each program is different, the following insights and suggestions (gathered from the participating programs) are adaptable to a wide variety of programs.

Center students and seek to learn from them.

Looking to students as experts in their own experiences, goals, challenges, and needs is critical to student-centered programming. Asking questions and listening actively helps practitioners gather key information; it is also one way to demonstrate to students that they, their goals, and their input are valuable and necessary. Participants found that active listening also led them to question their own assumptions and beliefs as practitioners, and that being willing to do that was an important part of being able to truly hear students and partner with them in their education. As one participant noted:

***We always say there's room for improvement:** this was the opportunity for us to do that [without carrying] all the weight of making the right decision. At least we can say we listened to what students and staff had to say, and that's a good way of approaching the work.*

- KARLA DELEON

Look for lessons in the challenges.

Many programs had projects or parts of projects that didn't work out. Effective programs used these as an opportunity to dig deeper and to find new information, strategies, and approaches.

*If we pretend we have it all together, we miss out on opportunities to help each other out. Everybody wants to say, "this pilot was fantastic," but **it's not always going to be fantastic and that's okay.** Sometimes change is quite incremental.*

- DR. CARMINE STEWART

Several programs noted that it was valuable to start with small, discrete projects to build skills and momentum, and that doing this allowed them to work up to much larger and more difficult projects.

Seek sustainability.

Several programs observed that treating the work like a large, complex project can make it feel unmanageable and thus unsustainable. A few programs addressed that challenge by setting aside regular,

intentional time to address DEI work. Others suggested balancing one-off projects with systems-level work that becomes self-sustaining. Still others emphasized the importance of treating DEI as a lens:

*I personally found [the project] daunting at first... **Frequently, DEI work is [presented] as a separate thing that you have to put all this into.** If it's incorporated and infuses the whole thing, it [can be] manageable and meaningful.*

- BETH REDDISH

Get others involved.

All programs agreed that it is essential to have allies in this work to make change more meaningful and sustainable. However, some programs felt it was important that everyone in a program or institution be involved, that pushing or even obligating people to change should be part of the work. Others felt that it was more effective to focus on colleagues who were interested in pursuing the work, and that forcing those who aren't interested changes the outcome of the work. What works for each program may be dependent on context and/or strategy.

Advocate for what you need.

Several programs noted that many systems are interested and investing in DEI work in new and more expansive ways, and that this has created some unique opportunities to advocate for the resources that programs need to do this work. One participant, for example, shared that this work uncovered data that she now uses to advocate for her program and students within their school district's DEI initiatives.

Discussion

Regardless of their intent or practice, every program that we surveyed found that engaging in intentional thinking and planning for diversity, equity, and inclusion benefited their program and students. Beyond aligning their program policies to their personal or shared values, participants reported meaningful changes in the attitudes and behaviors of their students and staff. Several programs also offered anecdotal reports of improvements in measures of overall program quality, including recruitment, retention, and attendance. While a quantitative study of such connections is outside the scope of this report, these observations suggest a connection between intentional planning for equity and inclusion—particularly planning that begins with reflection and that engages students as partners in the process—and the overall success of students and programs.

Programs noted that the work they did was, at times, challenging: creating program-level change is all-encompassing, reflective, and relational work that requires new ways of thinking as well as significant investments of time and attention. There is little practical guidance for doing this type of work in the specific context of adult education, and many programs lack institutional and systemic support or motivation to change. One participant (who was not part of this report) met so much institutional pushback that they were unable to make any progress at all. This can be a challenging outcome to accept, yet also offers lessons: to recognize when others aren't willing to participate, to practice turning to others who can support in other ways, to find other ways of pushing the work forward. As Dr. Stewart noted,

It isn't easy, smooth, or linear to work on something that's had hundreds of years to develop. *You can't undo centuries of work in four sessions with four people.*

- DR. CARMINE STEWART

Structure and support—like that provided by this and other PD opportunities—can help make intentional work around diversity, equity, and inclusion, manageable within our current context and can contribute to long-term sustainability and effectiveness for adult education programs and systems. We would highlight the following practices to make DEI work manageable and sustainable for programs and systems:

At the program level, we reiterate participants' advice to partner with students, start small, and consider incorporating the work into existing structures. Evaluating current program practices and policies can be a valuable place to start—especially if the evaluation process engages a diverse group of people in a variety of roles in collective reflection and action—and can also serve as a tool for engaging funders. Initial DEI evaluation and planning can be considered an opportunity for staff and students to develop trust, skills, frameworks, and shared language to identify and challenge

bias and assumptions. Strong relationships between and among students, staff, and program leadership allows for more effective program evaluation and navigation of conflict and change. Creating internal accountability structures—such as internal projects or deadlines—can help make the work feel more manageable and keep the work on track; connecting with other programs invested in the same work can provide opportunities for additional reflection and learning.

At the system level, we see value in investing in professional development and program-based coaching to guide and challenge programs as they question their biases and assumptions about adult education and adult learners, rethink their programming, and work toward change. We also see value in grounding that work in the reality of adult education, lifting up promising practices as models, and building out communities of practice and other opportunities for programs to talk about how they are rethinking their programming and learn from each other. Noting that all of the programs we surveyed named limited time and funding as a major challenge in continuing to center DEI work, we also want to highlight the effectiveness of providing funding for programs that choose to take on this work.

LIMITATIONS

Our interviews with programs suggest a connection between program policies and practices that promote equity and inclusion, program quality, and the wellbeing and academic success of students. As previously mentioned, quantitative evidence of this is outside of the scope of this project; however, we would welcome quantitative and longitudinal research exploring the connections between intentional planning for DEI and measurable student and program outcomes.

It is worth emphasizing that achieving truly equitable opportunities and outcomes for adult learners requires learning and action that are both deeper and more expansive than what was possible in the scope of this project. It requires internal work to identify and address our personal bias. It requires interpersonal work that helps us understand how those biases shape our decisions and how those decisions impact our colleagues and students. It also requires us to question and reimagine the very same systems that oppress and disenfranchise adult learners, their families, and their communities—including adult education itself.

To be clear, this is not meant to take away from the work that was done: indeed, all of the participants emphasized that this work was valuable to their growth and their programs, and that their perspective on equity in and beyond adult education has evolved along with the work that they are doing toward that end. Rather, we wish to emphasize that the work is deep, collective, multifaceted, and ongoing.

Finally, we recognize that many involved in this have already engaged in both self-directed learning and formal professional learning opportunities related to anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion beyond the scope of this PD initiative. Surely, their perspectives, ideas, and program projects were also influenced by those efforts in ways that we cannot capture.

Conclusion

Even as we acknowledge that this work must be ongoing and reflective, programs in this study found the process to explicitly address anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion to be valuable in meaningful ways. For programs and systems that decide to take this important journey, we note the following shared key concepts that evolved from our participating programs:

1. A small team of committed staff and students can help to build momentum and broader interest, especially when others see their enthusiasm and results start to show. Remember that an inclusive process that engages many voices toward meaningful change is going to take time.
2. Even as it can be helpful to celebrate small achievements along the path to larger goals when they signal commitment and progress, center sustainability as a key intent. Addressing deeply embedded systems of racism, inequity, and exclusion require us to think about this process as a marathon, not a sprint.
3. Relationships and trust matter when doing DEI work. Invest in learning from and with others in this journey, especially those whose lived experiences are most different from yours. It is also important at the outset to acknowledge the power relationships within a program and at every level of the system, and to address them explicitly so people are supported in taking risks.
4. Acknowledge that we all have something to learn and ensure that opportunities for professional and personal growth are supported.
5. Be honest about both areas of improvement and assets where they exist. Begin by conducting a program self-assessment that includes staff, students, and partners.
6. System-level investment in DEI work signals its importance and creates valuable resources and structure. Invest in training, coaching, and communities of practice that support programs and practitioners in doing and learning from the work.
7. Be bold about advocating for change. Find allies and partners who can help in this work.

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Appendix: Profiles of Participating Programs

BOSTON CHINATOWN NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER

Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC) is dedicated to empowering Asians and new immigrants by providing a broad range of innovative and family-centered programs and services, including adult education programming. The staff is committed to updating orientation practices to ensure relevance to all students, foster relationships between students, and create an environment where critical feedback is welcome.

Progress to Goals & Additional Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created videos with current students welcoming new students and sharing advice • Integrated videos into orientation and curriculum • Updated orientation policies to facilitate relationship building with all students • Took initial steps towards standardizing hiring process and hiring former students • Implemented flipped classroom and expanded learning options for students
Ongoing & Future Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase translation support • Expand student council • Organize a student literary magazine • Conduct a digital needs assessment • Collect more student data to identify areas for improvement
Website	www.bcmc.net

BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS ADULT LEARNING CENTER

Boston Public Schools Adult Learning Center provides a variety of high-quality educational services to parents, children, and employees of Boston Public Schools and Boston residents to develop their educational status, political status, economic status, and lives. Staff worked on the following goals: (1) organize and strengthen intake and orientation to build relationships with students and prepare them with necessary information and documentation, and (2) offer more flexibility and agency to students through online classes, a student information system that students can access on their own, a unified course catalog, and more frequent advising appointments.

Progress to Goals & Additional Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased use of QR codes to make it easier for students with beginning literacy to access materials • Consolidated day and evening handbooks with new graduation checklist and student success stories • Hired additional support staff • Purchased and implemented a student information system that allows students to manage their own classes, tests, and learning • Rearrange and redecorate entryway to be more welcoming: painted the walls; replaced fluorescent lighting; and added signs, comfortable furniture, hangings featuring students and quotes, and academic supplies
Ongoing & Future Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop student leadership team that participates in decision-making • Build out new website with more information and resources • Translate monthly student newsletter and documents for enrollment and orientation • Create wall hangings featuring student quotes and professional graduation photos of students and their families and quotes
Website	www.bostonpublicschools.org/domain/2442

EAST BOSTON HARBORSIDE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

East Boston Harborside Community School provides educational programming for East Boston and the surrounding communities, including ESOL and other courses that help residents improve their quality of life by empowering them with the tools to succeed in their jobs, furthering their education, and contributing to their communities through civic participation. Their work for this project focused on the following goals: (1) seek out and replace materials and language that reinforce bias or stereotypes in program curriculum and materials; (2) provide staff with ongoing workshops and in house professional development in unconscious bias and cultural competence; and (3) ensure program materials and practices welcome and reflect students' cultures and identities.

Progress to Goals & Additional Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modified curriculum to include more diverse voices and perspectives; integrated review process into regular staff meetings • Offered anti-bias workshops to staff as well as continuous conversations and work around anti-bias approaches to our programming • Surveyed students at end of year to evaluate general environment and services
Ongoing & Future Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to address bias and stereotypes in curriculum • Use DEI as a lens for program decisions and work
Website	www.ebhcs.org

INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE INSTITUTE OF MASSACHUSETTS

International Language Institute of Massachusetts (ILI) is a private, non-profit language school that promotes intercultural understanding and diverse communities by providing high-quality language instruction and teacher training. Staff worked on the following goals: (1) Update intake and orientation practices to center student voice, use clearer and more inclusive language, and emphasize commitment to DEI as a way to set the stage for future conversations; (2) update attendance policy and make it available to students in their native languages; and (3) add content to the curriculum that specifically address equity, antiracism, and cultural competence.

Progress to Goals & Additional Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created videos featuring students welcoming new students to the program in their language • Revised orientation practices to screen for barriers, share perspectives of current students, address questions and concerns, and make introductions • Wrote a more asset-driven attendance agreement • Revised curriculum to include a conversation about DEI and a resource guide to strengthen representation within the curriculum • Created a peer mentor position for students to connect with other students who speak their language
Ongoing & Future Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a DEI or antiracist book club for students and staff • Create additional videos explaining aspects of program life or policies in students' native language
Website	www.ili.edu

JULIE'S FAMILY LEARNING PROGRAM

Julie's Family Learning Program provides free educational services and supportive programs to help develop strong and successful families and adults. Their work for this project focused on demonstrating a commitment to anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion through representative marketing materials and images within the program's physical space.

Progress to Goals & Additional Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opened a discussion on DEI and the need for it with other staff members • Held a focus group with students to gather feedback on our marketing materials and physical space • Formed a committee to update the website with student work and photos • Installed clear directional signs in the building • Installed a welcome kiosk in the reception area to show student success • Updated hiring process to include questions related to DEI during interviews
Ongoing & Future Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer unconscious bias training to staff • Continue building open, trusting relationships with students; leverage relationships to identify more inclusive program practices, policies, and curriculum • Increase racial diversity of staff
Website	www.juliesfamily.org

THE PLYMOUTH PUBLIC LIBRARY LITERACY PROGRAM

The Plymouth Public Library Literacy Program provides free classes for adults who are working towards a high school equivalency credential and/or learning English. It is part of the Plymouth Public Library. Staff worked on improving language access and program presence within the library to demonstrate that students are welcome and to support student agency.

Progress to Goals & Additional Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Added program materials and an interpretation device at the library entryway • Made intake and other key materials available in students' native languages • Built support to accommodate needs of students with disabilities • Addressed non-academic student needs through a food pantry, shower, free snacks
Ongoing & Future Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a student newsletter • Engage additional volunteers who can support with translation and interpretation
Website	www.plymouthliteracy.org