



Study of the Engage New England Initiative Cross-Site Learning Brief 1

Learnings from the Cohort 1 Planning Process

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Introduction

In 2017, the Barr Foundation launched Engage New England (ENE), a signature initiative that provides a unique opportunity for local education agencies and nonprofits to plan for and develop innovative schools designed to serve students off track to high school graduation. School design partner Springpoint is leading three cohorts of grantees through a three-phase planning year: Understand, Design, and Build. During the Understand phase, grantees conduct research to understand the needs of their student populations. In the Design phase, the grantees design a school model to meet those needs; planning to launch that model begins in the Build phase. The first cohort of grantees received planning year grants for the 2017–18 school year and included a combination of new schools and school redesigns. During the planning year, these grantees assembled teams to lead the design work, collected and analyzed data to learn about their current or potential students and community needs and capacities, articulated design priorities, and began to plan for the launch of the new or refined school model.



The Barr Foundation's mission is to invest in human, natural, and creative potential, serving as thoughtful stewards and catalysts. Based in Boston, Barr focuses regionally and selectively engages nationally, working in partnership with nonprofits, foundations, the public sector, and civic and business leaders to elevate the arts, advance solutions for climate change, and connect all students to success in high school and beyond.

SRI Education, the research partner for the ENE initiative, captured the learnings from the planning process through interviews, classroom observations, and student focus groups conducted during March and April 2018.¹ Because of the timing of data collection, this brief focuses on lessons learned during the initial Understand and Design phases of work and does not capture learnings from the Build phase. The findings in this brief are based on the reflections of the school and design leaders and staff members involved in the design process as well as Springpoint staff members who supported the design process.

This brief is designed to benefit all three cohorts of ENE grantees as they plan and build their schools and to highlight key elements of planning for innovative school models.

- **Lessons Learned** ([p. 2](#)) summarizes grantees' reflections on prioritizing student voice and making the most of the design process.
- **Moving the Work Forward** ([p. 10](#)) presents common themes raised as grantees moved from planning to launching their schools.

Lessons Learned

School staff and students in the nine cohort 1 grantee sites identified the following lessons learned from their planning year experiences.

Lessons Learned

Student Voice

[\(p. 2\)](#)

- Recognize the enormity of the shift
- Be open to surprise
- Define clear research questions
- Establish structures to capture student voice
- Clarify students' roles in the design process

Design Process

[\(p. 7\)](#)

- Recognize the critical role of the school lead
- Ensure access to broad expertise
- Be intentional in constructing the design team
- Clarify roles and delegate responsibilities
- Protect design time
- Plan for meeting facilitation
- Start thinking about staffing early

Student Voice

The ENE initiative begins with a student-centered design process, aligned with the initiative's underlying positive youth development (PYD) framework. Full realization of this approach requires school design teams to capture student voice in both the Understand phase—to learn who their students are, what assets they bring to school, and what challenges they face that make engagement and persistence in school difficult—and the Design phase—to make sure that the design reflects students' needs and desires for school. Both tasks require a significant shift from traditional institutional norms, even for organizations that already emphasize PYD.

Recognize the enormity of the shift.

Many design team members came from organizations that embraced PYD and thought they already addressed student voice sufficiently. However, after going through the Understand and Design phases, they realized that their understanding of and response to student voice

Positive Youth Development

Springpoint's [How Students Thrive: Positive Youth Development in Practice](#) identifies five tenets of PYD that are critical for school design:

- Caring, trusting, and supportive relationships
- High expectations
- Voice, choice, and contributions
- Engaging learning experiences
- Consistency

PYD is the underlying framework for the ENE initiative, and schools designed around this framework should look and feel different from traditional high schools.

To build staff understanding of PYD, Springpoint recommends training offered by the [Youth Development Institute](#) and organizing visits to schools that have enacted a strong PYD culture. Springpoint offers a [list of such schools](#), as well as [a guide](#) for how to make the most of school visits.

was not as deep as they initially believed or as the initiative demanded. Part of this challenge stemmed from how radical a shift from traditional school norms the approach represented. A design lead described this divergence:

To actually be student centered means you have to give up power. I mean, if I'm going to be a staff-centered school, as a leader I have to give up that power and that decision making to the staff. So that same release has to happen from all adults to the students. That's...been an incredibly hard thing to do, especially when you've been so indoctrinated in a way of receiving information through...the traditional school model.

For most grantees, the first step toward making this shift was through learning about the students they served or planned to serve: their experiences with and desires for school, and where and why they get lost along the way.

Be open to being surprised by your students.

To really understand their students, design teams had to be open to learning, actively listen to students, and commit to acting on what they learned. Those who entered genuinely into this process, even those who thought they knew their students well, learned something new about their students during the Understand phase. For example, one grantee knew that students felt lonely, isolated, and disconnected, but staff did not realize the extent to which the school community mattered to the students or how deep some of the mental health issues ran:

Because we see them and they're functioning and they're smiling with their friends, but when

you actually start digging a little bit and you hear that constant underlying sadness that's there all the time, it's just kind of gut-wrenching.

New knowledge about their students helped grantees rethink their approach to school design and make it more responsive to students' needs and requests. One teacher described her realization of the degree to which staff assumptions were shaping ideas about what students want or need in school:

[Students gave] responses to "what do you really want from school," and a theme throughout was, "I need to make money."...I think we all know that, but seeing it on paper and seeing their written responses just kind of emphasized, at least for me,...they are kind of almost screaming at us what they want, and we keep...imposing what we think is better for them.

Partly because of students' desire to earn money, the grantee plans to prioritize integrating work-based learning experiences into the curriculum.

For another grantee, an analysis of student data revealed transfer students and seniors to be most at risk of dropping out. This knowledge prompted the design team to consider ways to structure the program so that it can serve students who may need some touch points but not necessarily the whole multiyear program.

As these examples demonstrate, to adequately structure a program for this population grantees must be open to learning more about their students and responding in ways that meet their needs. Being open does not mean being inundated, however. Grantees also need to be strategic in what data they collect and from whom.

Define clear research questions and learning sources.

The experiences of cohort 1 grantees in the Understand phase underscored the importance of defining a focused research agenda. In the absence of clear research questions, some grantees conducted many forms of data collection activities that sometimes yielded unhelpful information, led to data collection fatigue for participants, or produced more data than grantees had capacity to analyze. For example, one grantee spent a great deal of time creating and administering a school-wide survey, but the results were not informative because students were concerned about anonymity and had trouble answering sensitive questions related to adverse childhood experiences. Another grantee found it difficult to find enough time to analyze the data collected during the Understand phase and distill them into usable information.

Grantees can avoid information overload by starting with clear research questions guided by the pressing issues they want to address. These questions then should shape both how to collect information and from whom. Springpoint offers resources to guide grantees through the Understand phase, including how to develop research questions and choose the most appropriate research methods.

In general, cohort 1 grantees found that analyzing existing student data (e.g., demographics, absences/chronic absences, leavers, course failures, credit accumulation) and holding student focus groups and interviews were particularly valuable. One grantee examined student data to identify which subpopulations had the worst

outcomes, which helped the design team identify the target population for its pilot. Further, a design lead described how the focus groups provided more insights than the team previously learned from two years' worth of data from exit interviews, revealing that some students did not feel welcomed or respected by their teachers and prompting the team to prioritize student connections in teacher hiring. Another grantee held a focus group with graduates who said they struggled with not having the connection to a community once they left the program. Staff members are now considering what they can do to help graduates foster a sense of community outside school.

After having gone through the process, cohort 1 grantees provided examples of data collection that they wished they had conducted, which may benefit future cohorts; these include targeted focus groups with the most at-risk student populations as identified by secondary data analysis (e.g., transfer students) and brief phone interviews with students who had stopped attending the school.

Establish structures to capture a representative range of student voices.

Beyond learning about students' needs and desires for school, student-centered design involves intentionally creating a space for students to regularly share their thoughts and opinions and consistently and transparently involving students in decision making. As one design lead said, "What are those systems that will have to be in place that can make the student's voice be center to the daily practice is what we have to come up with and solve for."

All grantees recognized the importance of student voice in the design process, but some found it

difficult to incorporate students in decision making in a meaningful way. For example, one design lead described the logistical challenge of having students regularly attend design meetings, given the other responsibilities their students have outside school.

A few grantees did incorporate student voice in broad-based, productive, and transparent ways. One grantee was able to facilitate regular participation of three to six students on the design team by providing stipends. Both staff members and students felt that the students had voice in the process and made key contributions. A student described the positive outcomes of his involvement in the design meetings:

They centered this design program around us.... The principal, people in high power—they could talk all they want 'cause, at the end of it, they'll just [ask me] what do you think?...We're not done, so I can't entirely come to conclusions, but each time we have a meeting we come to a better tomorrow and understanding. As a student, I feel like we're cool; next year, I'm gonna get these things that I asked for from this meeting, and I think that what I've asked for in this meeting could help many students.

A few grantees created forums through which students could share their ideas outside of design team meetings. One grantee established Student Summits, in which students reviewed design priorities (available in Spanish and English) and provided input on specific design elements. A design team member described how this student input pointed to the need to continue to engage students and solicit their opinions: “A couple of them said, ‘It's all about how you implement this.

What's the schedule going to look like?’ [What they're really asking is] how will you give me transparency?”

Another grantee incorporated student voice by offering a design class. This class was held during the last block of the day and was open to students who had available time in their schedules. In the class, students responded to a document that asked for design features they would like to see, and then they researched those features to inform their discussion. Students said that they discussed all ideas until they came to agreement. A student shared, “One of [the design lead's] big things is to make sure that everybody's okay with things.... She wants to make sure that everybody meets in the middle with making compromises on choices.” Students suggested bringing in a therapy dog and creating a space in the school for meditation and yoga. This grantee also solicited broader student input during the weekly program-wide meetings and asked students for their feedback on the grantee's proposal for the next phase of the work.

Clarify students' roles in the design process and demonstrate how their input is used.

When grantees made it clear to students how their input was being used, students felt as though they had a voice in the process and that their recommendations were being taken seriously. Students appreciated these opportunities so that, as one student explained, “It's not just teachers throwing it at us.” Several grantees were successful in making students feel like a legitimate part of the design process by implementing their ideas. One student cited an example of when she suggested setting up a recruitment table at the

local mall, and the design leads ran with the idea and pulled a recruitment event together there. Two other students described how their feedback influenced a hiring decision after they helped interview candidates.

Students need clear guidance about how they are expected to contribute to the design process to ensure that their role is productive. Without this clarity, they may struggle to understand their purpose in the design work and may be uncomfortable sharing their ideas. One grantee asked students to weigh in on design decisions through ad hoc conversations or via text messages, but students did not clearly understand the design process, how they were selected for participation, and when or why they were asked for their input. The student member of another design team initially felt uncomfortable contributing,

especially when the team discussed issues outside his experience: “It’s hard, on my part, because I don’t really know much about school designing. I don’t have any experience in that. So, when I go into these meetings, a lot of the time I don’t really have much to say. We talk about budgets, things like that—I don’t really know anything. Half the time I feel like I’m sitting there.” The student said if he had been more informed about his role and the type of input the design team expected from him, it would have been easier to engage in the process.

Although students may require the greatest direction about the expectations for their participation, school design work will be new to many design team members, and the need to clearly define and communicate roles carries over to the design team as a whole.

Strategies for including student voice in the design process

Engaging a broad array of students in the design process can be a challenge, given the demands on students’ time and their responsibilities outside school. Some grantees found strategies that more deliberately involve students.

- **Provide stipends for student participation in design team meetings.** Budget constraints may limit the number of stipends offered, but stipends can enable students’ regular and continued attendance at meetings.
- **Assemble a student advisory group.** Springpoint provides a resource for setting up a student advisory group.
- **Develop a class focused on design issues.** Incorporate regular design discussions into a class or open period.
- **Establish student summits.** Convene students to provide input on specific design elements.

Design Process

To productively learn about student needs and plan a program that meets them, design teams needed to include individuals with the right expertise, identify clear roles and responsibilities to facilitate decision making, and devote significant time to the process. Grantees learned about the importance of explicitly planning who should be involved in the design process and how these participants work together.

Recognize the critical role of the school lead.

Grantees must identify a school leader early. The design process is an opportunity to orient the future school leader to the community's needs and immerse the leader in the school's design. Sites that wait to identify a school leader may run into challenges when making decisions, determining staffing needs, keeping momentum during the design process, and ensuring that the eventual school leader is on board with all components of the school design.

Ensure access to broad expertise.

No one person has all the expertise needed to design a school around student needs. Reflecting on their design team composition, grantees identified common areas where they needed expertise during the process. Learning from these reflections, grantees may benefit from a checklist of the various areas of expertise they need access to during the design process. Because large design teams can become unwieldy and have difficulty reaching decisions, access to someone with

Design Process Expertise List

- School leadership
- School operations and finances
- School launch
- Curriculum and assessment
- Social-emotional supports (guidance services, social work, childhood trauma)
- Social-emotional development
- Postsecondary connections
- Work-based learning and career connections
- Community partnerships
- Community/public relations

specific expertise from this list at key junctures is more critical than ensuring that all these topics are reflected within the regularly engaged team. When different expertise is needed will depend on the specific contexts of each grantee.

Be intentional in constructing a design team.

To structure the broader design team, some grantees established a large design team from the beginning to engage a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., community partners) as co-creators of the design, while others started with a small team and intentionally expanded as the planning year progressed. Although including more people can build buy-in, one grantee's design team, which comprised more than 10 people, struggled to use meeting times effectively and make decisions.

The design team was unable to reach consensus during these meetings, so it instituted a practice of voting on decisions to be able to move forward.

In contrast, smaller design teams can use meeting time more efficiently to make concrete plans or develop documents. However, they run the risk of missing important perspectives in the design process, which can limit credibility and broader buy-in. After realizing that the work was not widely understood by school staff, one grantee expanded its purposefully small design team during the Design phase to incorporate more diverse staff voices into the design process.

Design team expansion can be strategic from the beginning. For example, one design lead began with a small team but was intentional about what expertise to include early on, prioritizing social-emotional support and student or community engagement and later expanding the team to include members with expertise in academic content. The strategy of beginning with a small team and expanding based on the expertise needed can be effective if the team adequately orients new design team members to the work.

Some grantees found ways to navigate the tension of design team size and composition by establishing a core design team with additional members who participated as needed—either attending standing design meetings when available or separate meetings with the design lead.

Clarify roles and delegate responsibilities.

It is not enough to identify and bring the right experts together; teams must also ensure that roles are clear. When design team members held varying levels of positional authority in the school, district, network, or partner organization, role clarity was especially important. A few sites frequently stalled in making final decisions because of confusion about which team members were responsible for what areas.

One strategy that grantees used to define roles was to delegate ownership of specific responsibilities or topic areas. By appointing specific team members to manage the grant budget or contractual details, design teams can free up other members to focus on design questions related to their content expertise. A school leader with a strong belief in distributed leadership shared his philosophy:

I love to take advantage of people's strengths. My leadership style is not everything has to go through me. If people's experience brings something valuable to the table, I want them to run with it, and I want them to take on some leadership responsibility and say, "Let's develop that."

Protect design time.

Effectively engaging in student-centered design requires significant time for design teams to meet, reflect, plan, and execute. Staff in existing schools may struggle to carve out time for planning. Grantees used a variety of strategies to protect the time for design work. A few teams found that planning was more effective when they could meet for extended periods of time away from their

school, including occasional weekend meetings. Grantees also released staff members from duties during the school day and met during scheduled professional development and collaboration time. One school offered staff members stipends for time spent on the design process.

Plan for meeting facilitation.

How time is spent is just as important as making time. Grantees found that strong meeting facilitation boosted teams' productivity. A couple of sites worked with consultants to assist with meeting administration, such as setting the agenda, capturing meeting minutes, and identifying structured facilitation protocols, while others already had such processes as part of their school culture. One design lead described how using structured protocols supported collaborative decision making:

When we need to push through something, we attack it with a protocol, and say, "We're going to make some decisions around literally hundreds of edits." So, we will start a timer. We've got two minutes to make a call on this. Boom, boom, boom, and that's what we're going with. Next one.

Start thinking about staffing needs early in the design process.

As grantees identified the key characteristics sought in potential hires, two common needs emerged: finding staff members who reflect the population of students served and, equally important, finding staff members who demonstrate PYD mindsets—particularly a commitment to treating students with respect and warmth.

We asked [students] what they wanted out of their staff, and they said they basically just wanted staff that could relate to young people, who could understand them without judging them, people from the community.

-Design Team Member

Grantees recognized that their students need to see their experiences and identities reflected in the school staff. As one student shared, "Our teachers... they've also gone through some rough childhood stuff, their own private things, so they can relate to the stuff that we're going through and they'll make connections and try to make us feel not as extreme and make us feel welcome." In response, grantees sought to build staffs that reflect the ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the student populations. However, because of staffing shortages, ensuring that adults in schools reflect the populations of the students they serve is a long-standing challenge across the country.²

Although having a representative staff is ideal, schools can prioritize finding staff members who have experience with youth who are off track and who demonstrate a PYD mindset, even if their backgrounds do not match the student population. For example, recognizing that the school staff did not reflect the language diversity of the students and families, one design team identified two key characteristics to look for in hiring: certification to work with English learners and experience in leveraging strong relationships with students

and families into positive academic outcomes for youths. One grantee that already serves youth off track to graduate plans to move current employees to its new ENE pilot program instead of hiring new ones, so that staff members can focus on learning the new pilot model without simultaneously learning how to teach students who are off track. Further, at least two grantees explicitly structured job descriptions or interview criteria to include evidence of a PYD mindset.



Moving the Work Forward

Designing program components in the abstract can be difficult. Looking ahead, grantees in each cohort can and should take advantage of opportunities to learn from each other. As grantees transitioned from understanding their students and identifying design priorities to building the components of new and redesigned models, some had already implemented design elements and PYD practices that were identified as priorities by other grantees. Below are some examples of cohort 1 grantees' experiences to facilitate cross-site learning regarding common design priorities. Student-centered design, however, means testing and adapting strategies to meet the needs of the unique local context.

Mastery-based learning. Most grantees are pursuing competency-based systems in which students advance based on mastery of skills and content instead of seat time. Several of these sites are also implementing personalized learning platforms or curricula to enable students to work toward achieving competencies at their own pace. Some grantees partnered with external consultants—reDesign and the Center for

Mastery-based learning resources

Grantees can take advantage of the experiences and resources from similar initiatives.

Learnings from existing schools: Consult Springpoint's [profiles of mastery-based high schools](#) and view the Launch Pad blog for [five key lessons for mastery learning startup](#).

Toolkit: Springpoint and reDesign collaborated to create a [toolkit for mastery-based learning](#) that includes a resource bank with performance tasks.

Blended learning: For sites pursuing blended learning as part of a mastery-based system, Springpoint recommends resources from [The Learning Accelerator](#), specifically the [blended learning implementation guide](#).

Collaborative Education—to help them think through specific program components, such as curriculum, core competencies, or performance assessment.

Student agency and engagement. In keeping with PYD approaches, grantees sought ways for students to actively participate in their own learning. For example, one grantee offered students multiple avenues to drive their own learning and address needed learning standards—from selecting which topical theme a social studies class would cover to creating their own independent study courses, such as Dungeons & Dragons or History versus Hollywood.

Flexible scheduling. Flexible scheduling can have different meanings for different stakeholders, as one grantee learned: Parents and students interpreted it as different start and end times, whereas staff members imagined more radical rethinking of the school day. One grantee defined flexible scheduling as ensuring that students have choices in the physical facility, content, and the time of their learning. They envision a school with differentiated spaces where students can move to an environment conducive to a given activity and with asynchronous learning, allowing students to engage with any content area at any time, regardless of when they begin their school day.

Postsecondary connections. Several grantees aim to build connections to postsecondary education and work-based learning. Some have started with the postsecondary piece, ranging from college visits and exploring course auditing to

planning dual enrollment options where students take courses on a local college campus. Other grantees plan to concentrate on work-based learning by integrating career readiness skills into the curriculum, creating internship opportunities, or introducing students to local business owners who might serve as mentors or employers.

Social-emotional skill development and supports. Most grantees have identified design priorities related to social-emotional skill development, or support. Some grantees emphasized building strong student relationships with staff and were exploring establishing or revising advisory structures to help students develop social-emotional skills. Springpoint recommends Turnaround for Children’s [Building Blocks for Learning](#) as a practical framework for conceptualizing the development of skills and mindsets youths need to be successful. Grantees also considered how to provide mental health and other supports through staffing and community partnerships.



Grantees will inevitably learn more as they undergo the important and hard work to provide innovative school experiences for students off track to graduate.

Barr and Springpoint will continue to offer opportunities for sharing across grantees over the course of the initiative, including across cohorts. All stakeholders should continue to learn and modify their approaches as the initiative progresses.

Endnotes

1 SRI researchers interviewed two Springpoint staff members and conducted site visits to all nine Cohort 1 grantees, including 74 interviews, nine classroom observations, and seven student focus groups.

2 Ilegas, A. M., & Irvine, J. J. (2010). Diversifying the teaching force: An examination of major arguments. *The Urban Review*, 42(3), 175-192.

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