KEAN UNIVERSITY

KEAN
John S. Watson Institute for
URBAN POLICY & RESEARCH









CULTURAL TRAILBLAZERS: THE COVID YEARS

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About Us

Kean University

Kean University is a public cosmopolitan university serving undergraduate and graduate students in the liberal arts, the sciences and the professions. Kean is the first and only urban-focused research university in New Jersey, dedicated to the important work of conducting research on issues that impact the state's urban centers. Kean University officially earned an R2 research university designation under the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, marking a significant milestone in Kean's rapid transformation into a premier research institution. This places Kean among the top eight percent of colleges and universities nationwide for research and doctorate production. A member of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, Kean is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) of which first-generation college students comprise over a third of the student body. Kean's diverse students engage in research and creative projects that develop sustainable solutions to critical issues across the state.

The John S. Watson Institute For Urban Policy and Research

The John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research is committed to advancing the understanding of key public policy challenges and expanding the range of policy ideas, perspectives and solutions through its integrated policy centers and initiatives. The Watson Institute actively researches issues impacting the state's urban centers and works to develop practical, evidence-based solutions to address them. Named in honor of the late New Jersey Assemblyman John S. Watson, the nation's first African American chairperson of an appropriations committee, the Watson Institute serves as a vital resource for New Jersey decision-makers through a practical, nonpartisan, hands-on approach to informing public policy and linking people to policy. With over thirty years of steadfast service, the Watson Institute has a powerful mission and vision that guides its work and reflects our commitment to uplift residents' voices in policymaking, ensuring that community insights and priorities shape the journey toward a healthier and more sustainable urban environment.

MISSION

Through linking people to policy, we champion solutions that prioritize healthy urban communities.

VISION

We amplify residents' voices to ensure they are heard in policy development and implementation, fostering healthier urban communities.



The Watson Institute has six integrated policy centers that include:

» **The Urban Mayors Policy Center** provides support to the New Jersey Urban Mayors Association (NJUMA) on a wide range of issues, including providing critical insights and essential analysis of policies, issues and opportunities facing New Jersey's urban centers.

» **The Center for the Urban Environment** is dedicated to addressing the disproportionate amount of pollution found in low-income communities and communities of color.

» **The Center for Economic and Workforce Development, Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation** is proudly designated as a United States Economic Development Administration (USEDA) University Center. The Center works on initiatives that promote the development of resilient businesses, living-wage jobs and a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

» **The Center for Urban Policy Research (CUPR)** positions equity as a lens through which to evaluate issues facing urban centers and analyze legislative, executive, judicial and regulatory actions impacting urban spaces.

» **The Center for Health Policy Development** works collectively with health organizations and elected officials across the state to advance health policies.

» **The Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children (CPDUC)** examines the vulnerabilities and resilience of urban children and the workforce that cares for them. The Center works to advance children's health, well-being and educational outcomes through policy analysis and development, professional development, and applied research that informs, calls to action and provides pathways to closing equity gaps for urban communities.

The New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Institute and Mentoring Program is one of the signature programs at the Watson Institute under the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children. The program was established in 2007, and is a 16-year, evidence-based intervention designed to provide educators with the opportunity to intentionally examine the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms while providing support that can close the racial achievement gaps for disadvantaged students. The program has worked with 366 teachers across the state of New Jersey in school districts and community provider settings, as well as with over 200 school leaders. This intervention model provided 21 hours of professional development and 25 hours of coaching to educators in Pre-K to twelfth grade who serve low-income students who qualify for the free and reduced lunch subsidy and speak languages other than English at home. While this program has been housed at Kean University for the last four years, it was previously at another institution of higher education. This report presents the findings of the program during the COVID-19 years (2020-2023), and what we learned about the resilience of students, parents and educators who participated in the program.



Introduction



March 2020 is forever etched in the minds of every administrator, educator, student, caregiver and community stakeholder across the globe. In that one moment, the world of education changed forever. On March 6, 2020, all public schools in New Jersey were required to stop face-to-face instruction and implement "appropriate home instruction" by an executive order signed by Governor Phil D. Murphy (Shamburg, Amerman & Bahna, 2021, p.1). The 2020 quarantine, a strategy used to prevent the transmission of COVID-19, tested the very fiber of what we call resilience and grit among educators, parents, caregivers and students. Many questions arose, such as: What did children as young as five and six years old know about logging on to online learning with and without supervision? How did students manage a fishbowl learning experience while their families watched them interact with teachers and demonstrate their competencies? How were parents and other caregivers navigating their work schedules, remote learning and lack of technology? How were teachers managing their own families' needs and their own well-being while staying connected to their colleagues? These factors should have prevented teachers enrolled in the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Institute and Mentoring Program from adopting and implementing culturally responsive classroom practices during such a crisis given the priorities at hand.

The program's primary goal is to raise awareness among teachers to become culturally and linguistically conscious and responsive. Through our intervention, we examined how professional development and coaching cycles changed how the teachers thought about culture and language and adopted additional best practices to teach and interact with diverse, multilingual learners. The program goes far beyond a simple overview of diversity. It provides a guided experiential journey of discovery for educators to explore their own cultural identities, biases and misconceptions, allowing them to help their students articulate and hold their cultural wealth in a place of value. "Cultural wealth is the values that families hold sacred as they come to a new country, such as language, traditions, rituals, artifacts and cultural nuances shared among their family members and cultural group. Teachers who are culturally conscious and responsive to students and their families value what they bring to the learning experiences. The cultural wealth of students then becomes a tool for teachers as they interact and provide instruction to diverse students whose first language is not English or the dominant societal language" (Berdecia, 2023).

The New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Institute and Mentoring Program is the only program of its kind in the state that combines professional development with intensive mentoring that supports how teachers create and sustain positive interactions with diverse students and their families. Mentorship is at the heart of the program model and its results. Careful investing and training of mentors provide cultural coaches who work alongside teachers to challenge their thinking and teaching practices. The program has a quantitative and qualitative data collection system that demonstrates that although teachers enter the program unaware of how to start, upon completing the program, they will have developed effective strategies for working with culturally diverse, multilingual learners. This mentoring is conducted by tracking the program's 26-evidenced-based strategies and utilizing a cultural and language five-point scale that measures which areas teachers have been successful in and areas that need further development. The team has seen teachers greatly improve their ability to become more culturally and linguistically conscious and responsive through experiencing a shared body of knowledge and applying that knowledge in their classrooms.

Program Pivots During the COVID-19 Years

Before COVID-19, the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Institute and Mentoring Program provided professional development followed by face-to-face on-site mentoring a month after the learning institute. Between 2019 and 2023, the program worked with two school districts: Trenton Public Schools and Rahway Public Schools. The Trenton School District had two cohorts of teachers who received professional development and mentoring. The Rahway School District had two cohorts of teachers who only received professional development.

Before the lockdown, a three-day in-person learning institute was held for the Trenton School District, and after the lockdown, a virtual three-day learning institute was held for the Rahway School District. Due to school protocols, mentors were not given access to Google and Zoom classrooms to observe teachers in real-time with students during the first two years of the quarantine. The Culture and Language Five-Point Scale Assessment, developed by Ana I. Berdecia, could not be used to gather data. The mentoring component of the program was modified to continue to support teachers and school leaders in becoming culturally courageous innovators who were not afraid to talk about race or adopt practices that have the potential to close the racial achievement gaps for diverse learners who speak languages other than English. The three domains of the scale (classroom design, teachers'dispositions and instructional practices) were still the focus of the mentors' reports, which provided continuity of the original program model. In addition, a virtual leadership institute was held for Trenton public school leaders who were principals and vice principals in the participating schools in the program. In Rahway, school leaders participated in the learning institute alongside their teachers. The program model was modified to meet the needs of both school districts and teachers' schedules while still attempting to hold the essential components of the evidence-based program together.

The program pivoted in the following ways:

- Professional development hours were offered via a **Zoom platform**.
- Coaching continued via the Zoom platform and through **supportive telephone calls**.
- Mentors interacted with assigned teachers **more frequently** and surveyed their challenges, state of mind and self-care practices at each coaching session.
- **Professional development hours were modified** at the request of the districts and due to the lack of availability of substitutes to replace teachers during professional development.
- Each cohort received **incentives based on their needs**, utilizing the district's funds and corporate sponsors. Cultural toolboxes valued between $300-$500 were customized for the grades and needs of the students.

Pivots in the Data Collection Processes of the Program

The COVID-19 crisis altered the program in many ways. The data analysis showed the experiences of the participating teachers and the efficacy of the intervention pivots. Qualitative data was heavily relied on rather than quantitative data and instead of sharing data cross-mentoring visits, the data primarily focused on comparing the pre- and post-assessments and the coded narratives from the mentors' reports. For the first year, the data was coded by one coder and analyzed by the coder and the program director, before being segmented into themes that capture both the challenges and moments of resilience of teachers during those difficult times. The second year, the professional development evaluation forms and the anecdotal notes taken by trainers were used to measure the impact of the program on participants. In the third and fourth year, pre- and post-assessments were compared, and analysis of the adoption of the 26 evidence-based strategies was recorded during a mini practicum. The practicum captured data on teachers' knowledge and implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy. The three-day (face-to-face) institutes shifted to online institutes via the Zoom platform. The coaching/mentoring components later transitioned to an online platform, and supportive calls via phone were added to measure how teachers were managing teaching as well as their personal and professional lives. Mentors also stayed connected to their assigned teachers via texting, emails and mail correspondence. Due to this unprecedented event, mentors connected with teachers during the summer and extended the coaching/mentoring into the next academic year.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Educators

Despite these challenges of COVID-19, many educators found ways to be cultural trailblazers during these unprecedented times. Many teachers were able to step up, stay strong personally and professionally, handle academic priorities and goals for their students, and provide socio-emotional support to both parents and students, which is an essential part of cultural responsiveness. As part of this program, we gathered quotes from our mentors and their observations on teachers' experiences during this time.

The first thing we did after the announcement of the school lockdown was to issue a survey asking teachers what they needed and what adaptations to the culturally responsive program we could make to support them. Teachers indicated that support for technology as they moved from in-person to a virtual classroom and the emotional/mental support to balance both professional/personal lives were among the highest needs identified. The chart on the next page summarizes the survey findings for Cohort 1 during the first year of COVID-19.

Mentors' Quotes



"My assigned teachers talked about the importance of boundaries and margins. The tension of COVID-19, social isolation, anxiety, and the aftermath of George Floyd weighed heavy on the teachers' minds and hearts. They mentioned how they missed interacting with their students and fellow educators. They liked having joint coaching sessions and they became a support to one another."

- Kamili Leath, Cultural Mentor

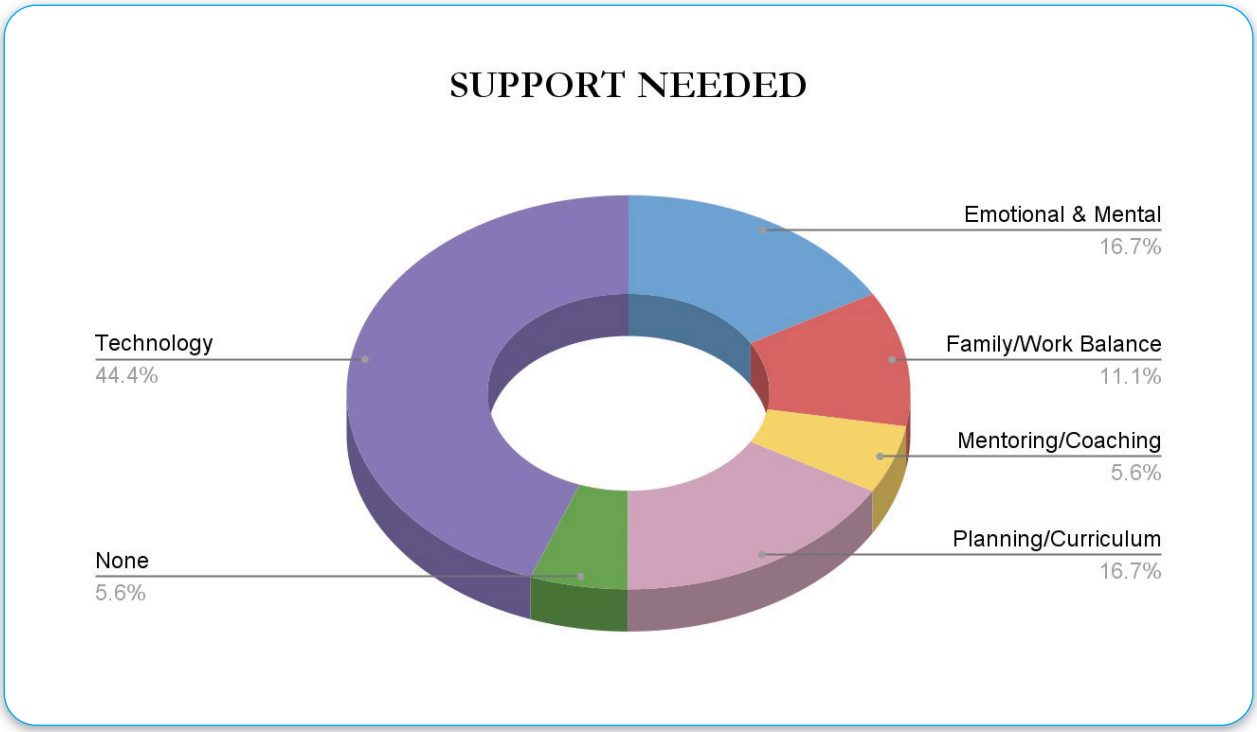


"Teaching is a tough job and the pandemic made it harder. I applaud these teachers for their determination, perseverance, and dedication to their students and their families. The teachers just needed someone who would listen with compassion and empathy and who also understood what they were experiencing. We supported one another and brainstormed ideas together about grade level supports and culturally responsive practices."
- Dr. Bridget Turner, Cultural Mentor



"We connected in real ways in this difficult time and supported each other to focus on what we could control. One teacher shared her heart ached from missing her students."

- Kiya Green, Cultural Mentor



Survey Findings

The survey showed that the number one issue teachers needed support for was technology (44.4%). Not only were our teachers facing technological issues, but so were educators nationwide as they were moved to platforms they had never used before. Students, especially multilingual learners, were also facing these same problems.

"Many schools and neighborhoods did not have internet hotspots, which made it hard for ELLs who lived in locations with poor internet connectivity. Even when hotspots were made available, most could not handle connecting two or more devices. As such, the first two weeks of remote learning were the hardest on students as they did not know how to join class meetings and do assignments. This is not to say that districts did not try to make efforts to help these students with the transition, but for ELLs, these endeavors often failed as they did not account for the possibility that ELLs may not have used these platforms before, and therefore, needed bilingual technical support. The challenges that ELLs and their families faced revealed systemic inequality within New Jersey's educational system and society in general. Some of these students then "disappeared" from virtual classrooms" (English Learners in New Jersey p.19-21).

The second top issue our educators asked for support for was emotional and mental health (16.7%). Throughout the country, teachers reported an increase in the level of stress. This uptick in stress, which is often described as "a psychological reaction to environmental conditions (stressors) that produce a variety of effects including physical arousal and threats to wellbeing," as well as other emotional/mental health issues, was reflected in our teachers' surveys (MacIntyre et al., 2020, p.2). In a Canadian study, researchers found teacher stress was linked to the combination of a high level of concern for vulnerable students and an increased awareness of inequalities among their students (Baker et al., 2021). Likewise, the critical stressor they found in their studies increased demands on teachers as they transitioned to virtual classrooms. Other stressors they discovered included separation from family and friends due to quarantining, inability to partake in enjoyable activities, deaths in students' families and their own families, teaching their own children on top of others, feeling unsafe, and taking care of people at home (Baker, p.495). This study explained that chronic stress and negative emotional/mental health (e.g., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, feelings of inefficacy) are alarming because of their association with less effective teaching, more disruptive behavior among







students, worsening student-teacher relationships, and more teacher turnover (Baker, p. 492). Therefore, support for educators' emotional and mental health is essential for an effective classroom environment.

Teachers in our program also asked for support in the following: 16.7% planning/curriculum, 11.1% family/work balance and 5.6% mentoring and coaching. Regarding mentoring, 69.2% of the teachers indicated they found it beneficial, and 30.8% were not sure about the benefits. An incredible 92.3% expressed an interest in continuing the program's mentoring component when COVID-19 protocols were lifted and they returned to the classroom.

Teachers identified key challenges arising from COVID-19, including:

- A lack of student attendance through virtual platforms
- A lack of colleague connection/interactions
- Having to be more creative in their teaching approach
- Language barriers
- Lack of completed and returned assignments from students
- Staying focused while balancing work and home life
- Connecting with students to support them
- A lack of technology skills/support

In the last five years, the educational landscape changed due to COVID-19, and every year presented new challenges and innovative solutions to navigating the educational experiences of diverse learners. During year one (2019-2020), there were shortages of masks, personal protective equipment and access to technology for navigating virtual classrooms interactively and engagingly. Schools had to make several teaching adjustments, from face-to-face instruction to Google Classroom and Zoom instruction. In year two (2020-2021), schools transitioned to hybrid models with cohorts of students coming to school every other day before finally returning to fully in-person instruction in the third year (2021-2022). Just as students were returning to the classroom, during this school year, over 1.28 million students enrolled in New Jersey's public schools (English Learners in New Jersey, 2022, p.7). In years four and five (2022-2024), students received in-person instruction with masks being optional for both students and teachers as cases were less prominent but still impacting the community.

Increased Demographics for Diverse Multilingual Learners

According to the New Jersey Department of Education, approximately 93,000 students were English-language learners – roughly 7% of the total enrollment population. An English-language learner (ELL) is "a student who speaks a language other than English, is limited in his/her/their English proficiency, and is learning English (usually) as a second language." In general, in the United States, ELLs are disproportionately students of color and economically marginalized. Many students, including those who are not ELLS, have parents who speak languages other than English. As of March 2021, the top ten languages spoken by ELLs in New Jersey were (in order by most spoken): Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Chinese, Korean, Gujarati, Urdu, Bengali, and Russian (*English*, 2022, p.7-12).

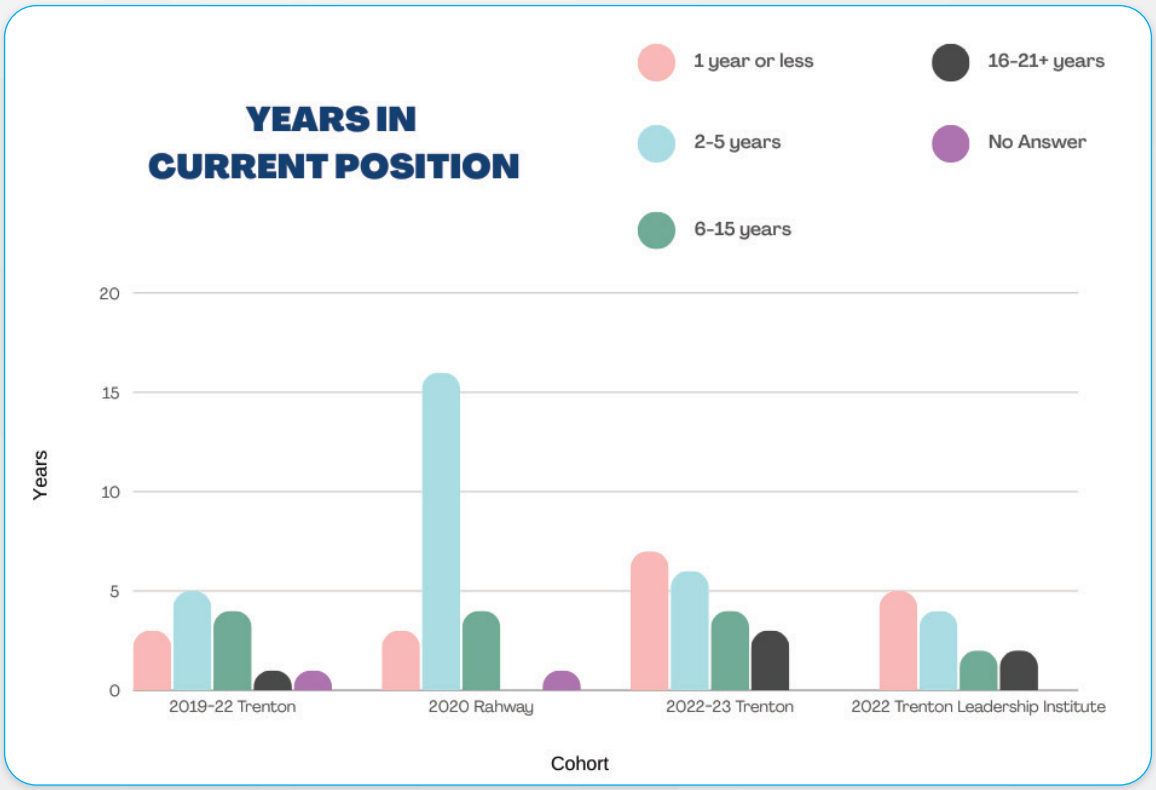
Many educators were cognizant of what issues these students could face because of their experiences, and COVID-19 isolation and restrictions only complicated the business of providing "a thorough and efficient education to students," as the New Jersey Constitution states. Still, many other factors made the COVID-19 experience challenging for educators. The business of education continued as managing the virus' variants became more difficult and COVID-19 cases increased. Anxieties caused by the shelter-in-place protocol, isolation, the fear of the unknown, lack of time to grieve the deaths of loved ones and providing remote learning with the added responsibility of home life and educators' own children's educational needs created a house of cards ready to collapse. However, these issues did not simply disappear when schools returned to normal in-person instruction in 2022. The impact of COVID-19 is still being felt today. Nevertheless, administrators and teachers found strength, resiliency and creativity to find new ways to provide hundreds of students with a quality, culturally responsive and meaningful learning experience. One important lesson learned by the program team was to listen and respond to the challenges COVID-19 posed for the educators on a case-to-case basis while providing support. These supports included strategies for culturally responsive teaching, but moreover, they focused on the well-being of ELLs and the workforce.

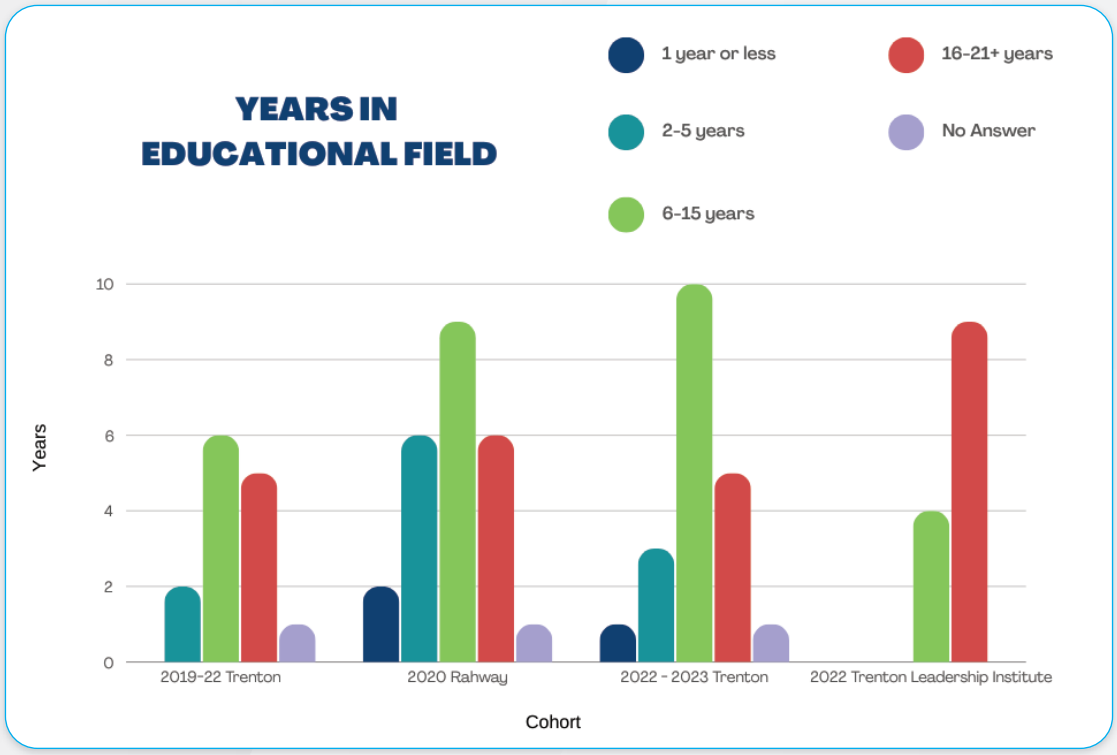
THE COHORTS THROUGH THE YEARS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & MENTORING OFFERINGS

Trenton Public Schools	Year	Number of Educators	PD or Mentoring	Days and Hours
Cohort #1	2019-2022	13 Educators	PD	3 days/21 hours (in-person)
Rahway Public Schools	**Year**	**Number of Educators**	**PD or Mentoring**	**Days and Hours**
Cohorts #2 & #3	Oct.-Dec. 2020	18 Educators 7 School Leaders	PD	6 days/ 30 hours (virtually via Zoom)
Trenton Public Schools	**Year**	**Number of Educators**	**PD or Mentoring**	**Days and Hours**
Cohort #4	2022-2023	22 Educators 11 School Leaders	Mentoring	2.5 days/20 hours (in-person/virtual)
Four Cohorts		**53 Educators 18 School Leaders**		**Four Learning Institute Totaling 71 PD Hours**

Demographics: Cohorts by Year





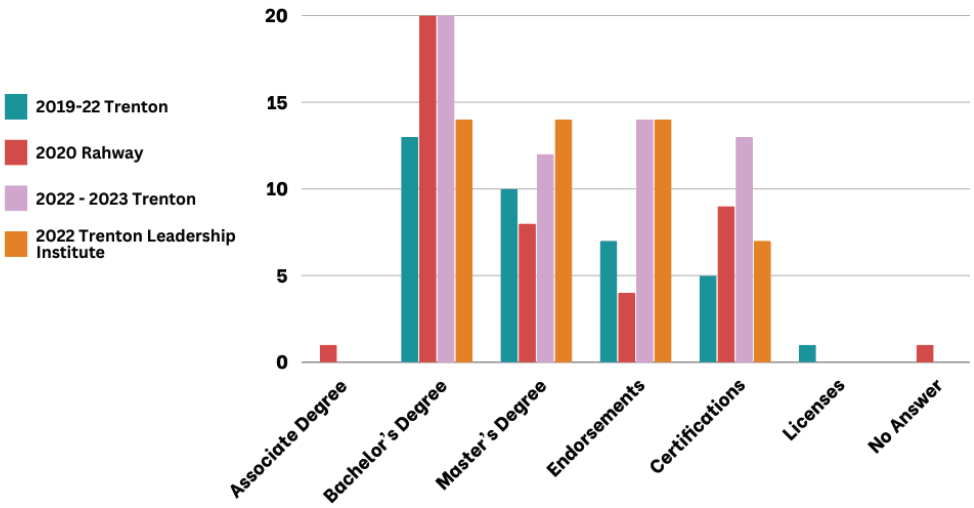
Ethnicity			
Ethnicity: Eduators could choose more than 1	**2019-2022 Trenton**	**2020 Rahway**	**2022-2023 Trenton**
African American	6	1	5
Asian	1	1	0
Caucasian	3	10	5
Hispanic	4	10	8
Other	0	1	1
No Answer	1	1	1

Country of Origin: Educators could choose more than 1	**2019-2022 Trenton**	**2020 Rahway**	**2022-2023 Trenton**	**2022 Trenton Leadership Institute**
The Caribbean (Cuba, Dominican Republic, Guyana, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago)	2	7	8	2
Central America (Costa Rica, El Salvador)	0	2	1	0
Central Europe (The Czech Republic, Germany, Poland)	1	3	0	0
India	0	1	0	1
South America (Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador)	0	3	2	1
Southern Europe (Italy, Portugal)	0	1	1	0
Southeastern Europe (Greece)	0	0	1	0
The United States (California, New York, North Carolina, Virginia)	11	5	7	6
Western Europe (England, Ireland, Scotland, the United Kingdom)	1	0	0	5
No Answer	1	3	1	3

Demographics of Ethnicity in Cohorts

CREDENTIALS/EDUCATIONAL LEVEL:

Educators could list more than one



Reflections from Learning Institute Participants

"The role play with Richlanders and Awakens... showed me that students need more visuals, and the more colorful and fun the better."

"I enjoyed the opportunity to role-play. It gives us more of an insight on how we may anticipate welcoming a new culture or person."

"I enjoyed learning of ways to immerse children's culture into the curriculum such as the cultural literacy moment we created."

"[The speakers made] this environment safe and comfortable to be able to speak my mind without feeling judged."

"I have honestly learned so much, and I wished that we could have more time together."

"This is a program that should be taught and implemented in many/all of our schools."

"There was absolutely nothing that I did not enjoy! This experience was everything."

"Very inspiring and purpose-driven."

Measuring Knowledge Shifts from Pre-Test to Post-Test During the Learning Institute

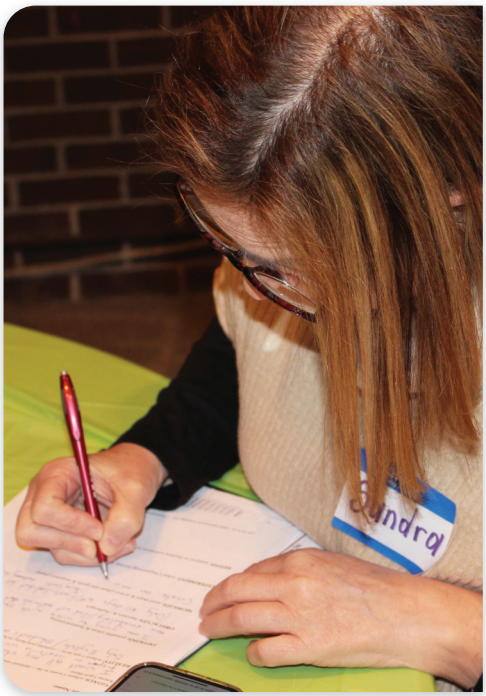
Each cohort began with professional development to provide knowledge about cultural competency and how to incorporate cultural pedagogy into the classroom utilizing 26 evidence-based practices. The three-day learning institute included topics such as program overview, exploration of cultural biases, the value of mentoring/coaching, first and second language acquisition, cultural consciousness as it relates to being more culturally responsive and relevant, utilization of cultural literacy moments, and understanding the world of multilingual learners and the immigrant experience. Other topics discussed were building communities of acceptance, examining the affective filter as it supports socio-emotional learning and reduces/increases stress, and modeling the importance of solid and predictable routines. Participants filled out pre-and post-tests that measured their knowledge of the core program concepts. To measure comprehension of these concepts, we utilized a rubric allowing responses to fit into four categories: basic, competent, proficient and advanced.

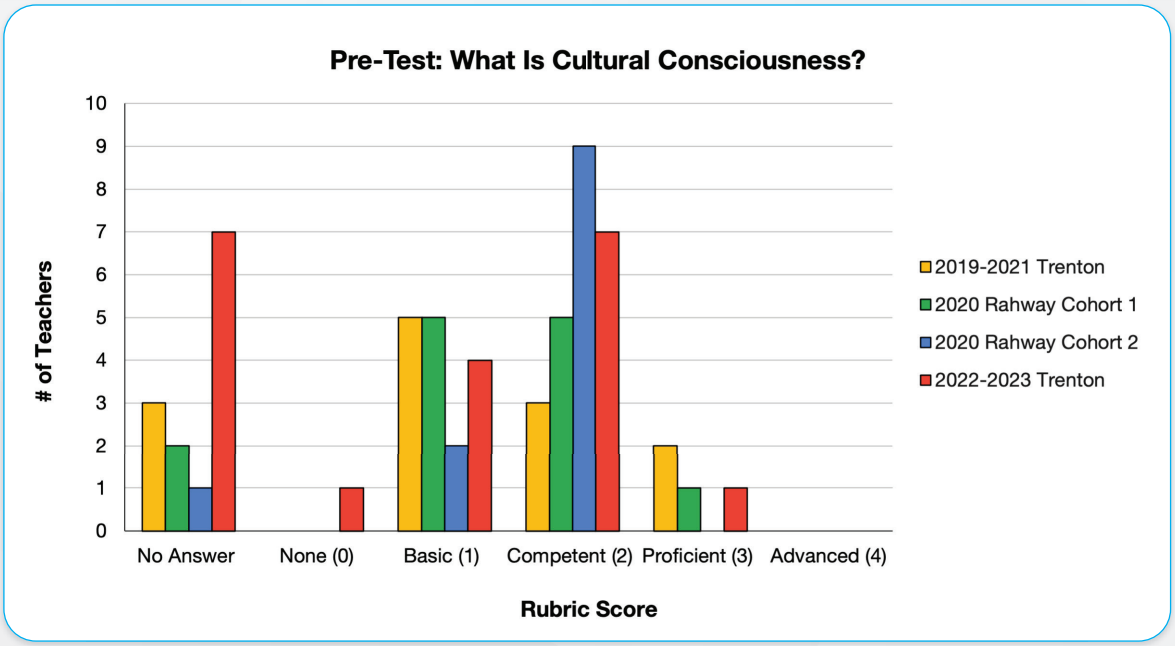
The program provided educators with 26 strategies that can be used across three domains (classroom design, teachers' disposition and instructional strategies). Following the completion of the professional development institute, teachers listed strategies they would implement in the future: provide students with choices, utilize routines and transitions in lessons, play multicultural music, use gestures and visuals when giving instructions, conduct read-aloud with props, and include students' home language(s) in classroom visuals and materials. Other strategies teachers hoped to implement were ones focused on interactions and engagement with diverse families, such as sending families information in the families' preferred home language(s), encouraging family projects (heritage posters), and encouraging parents to come to school events.

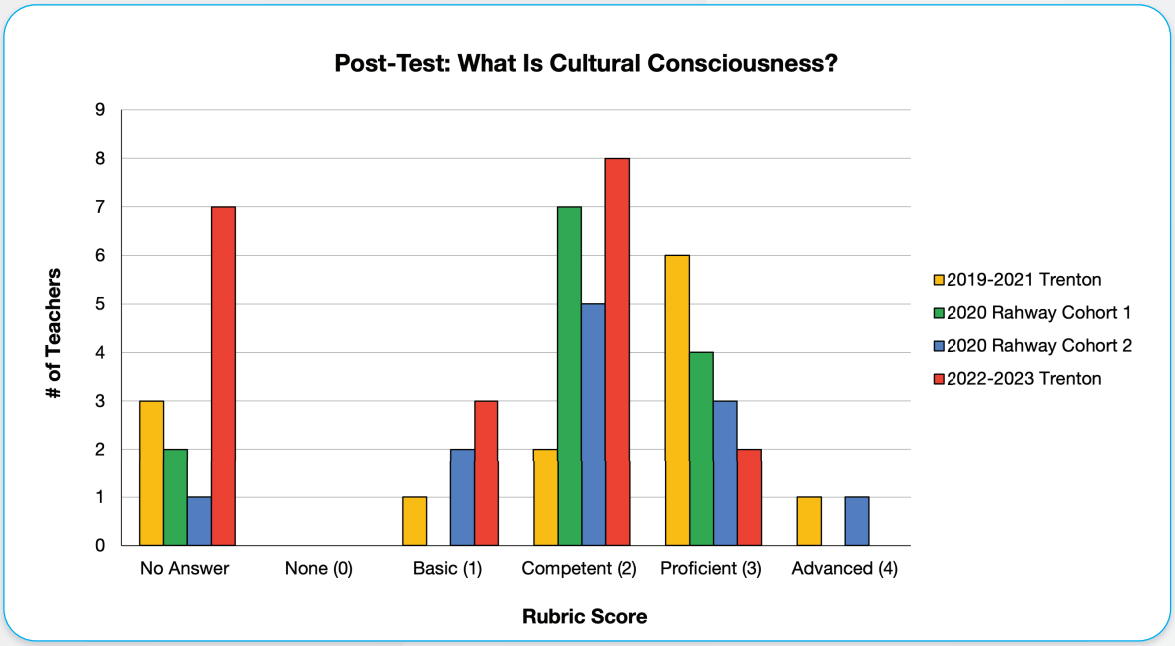
According to the pre-tests, participants from all four cohorts mostly identified their knowledge of the concepts as basic. While the overall post-test ratings demonstrated a shift in teachers' knowledge from basic and competent to proficient and advanced during the three-day learning institute. Participants gained more confidence in their understanding of the core concepts and their ability to create and implement culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms along with parent engagement strategies. This upward trend in the data would also later be reflected in the mentors' narratives and program evaluation forms. The following charts compare the results of each cohort's pre- and post-test responses, both for questions we classified, and ones that were self-reported.

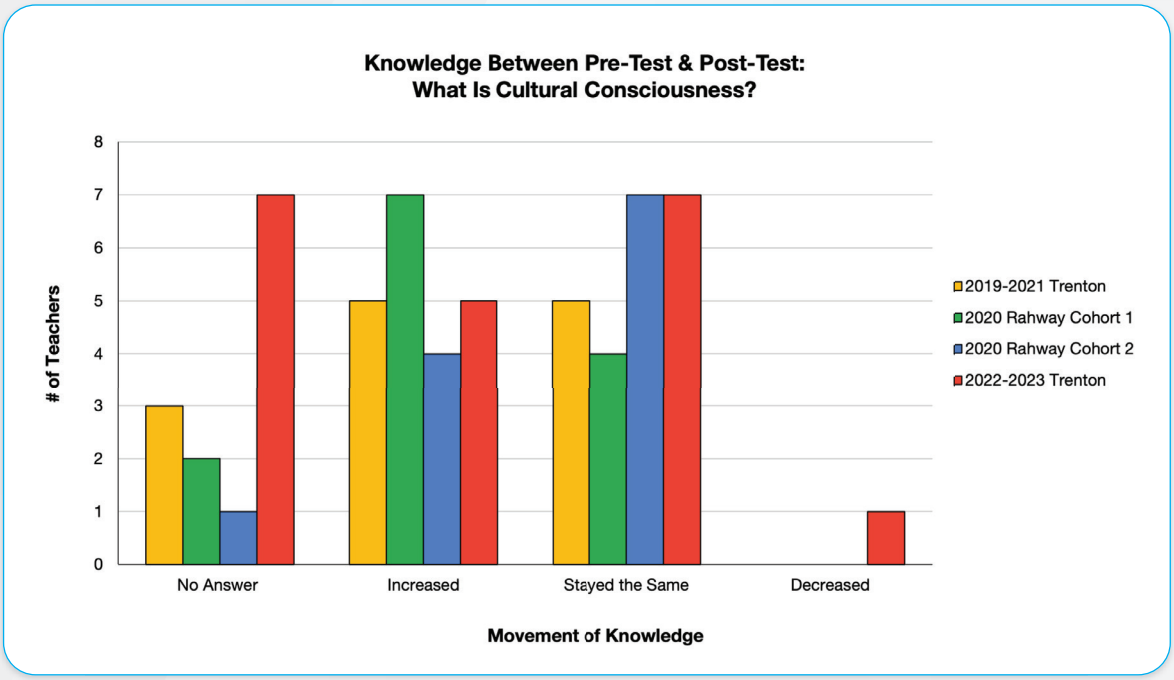


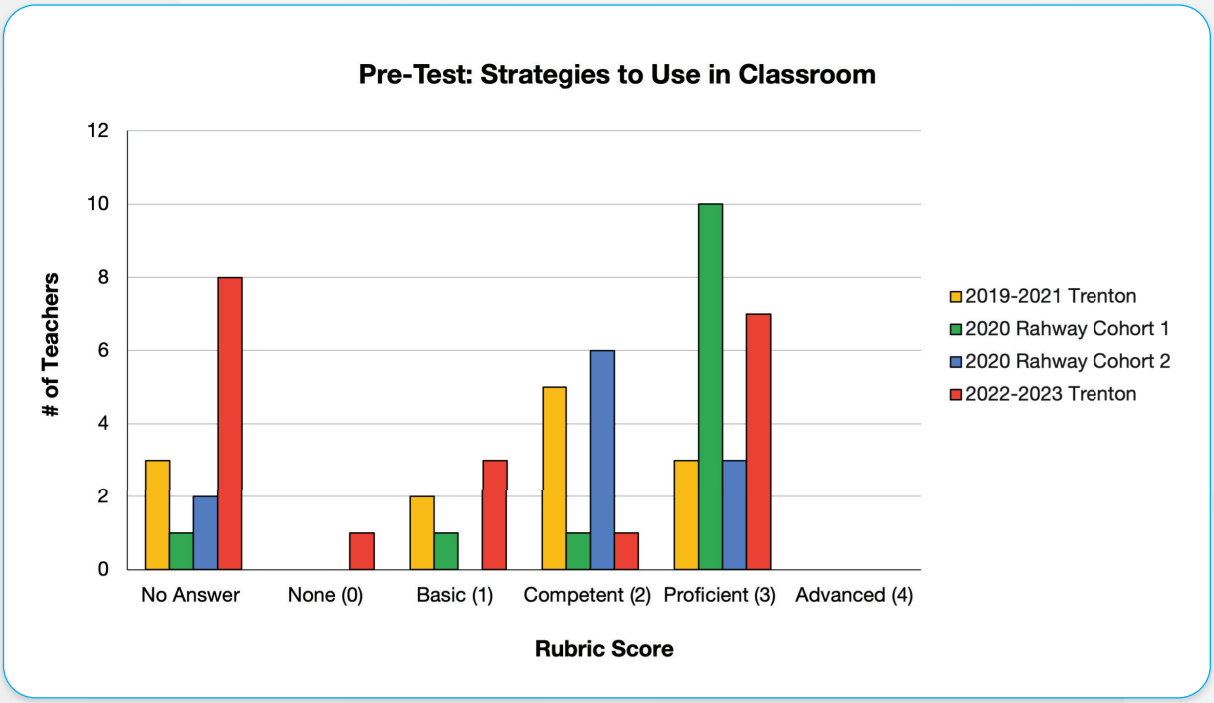


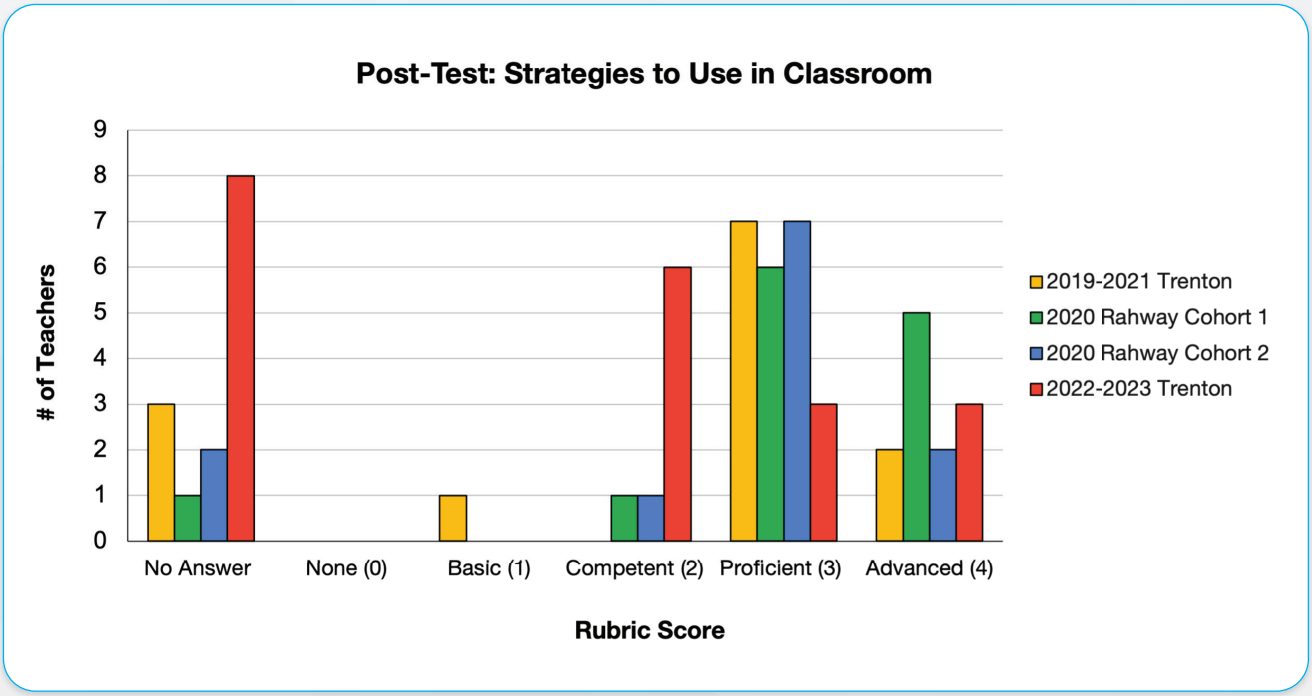


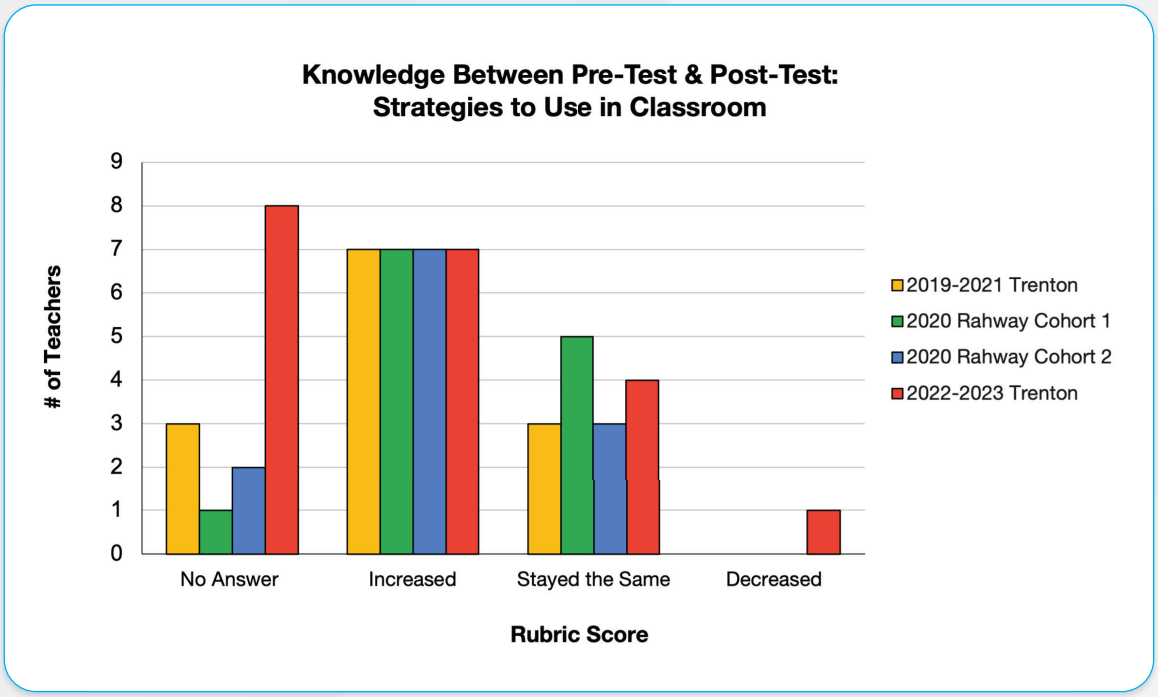

Pre-Test: What Is Cultural Consciousness?
# of Teachers
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
No Answer
None (0)
Basic (1)
Competent (2)
Proficient (3)
Advanced (4)
Rubric Score
2019-2021 Trenton
2020 Rahway Cohort 1
2020 Rahway Cohort 2
2022-2023 Trenton


Post-Test: What Is Cultural Consciousness?
# of Teachers
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
No Answer
None (0)
Basic (1)
Competent (2)
Proficient (3)
Advanced (4)
Rubric Score
2019-2021 Trenton
2020 Rahway Cohort 1
2020 Rahway Cohort 2
2022-2023 Trenton

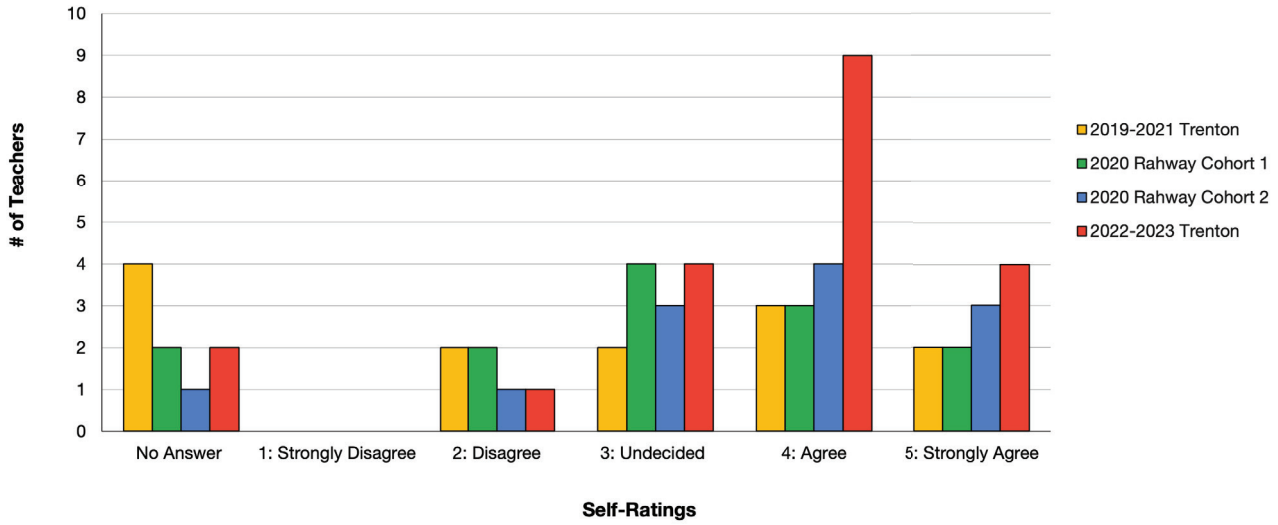

Knowledge Between Pre-Test & Post-Test:
What Is Cultural Consciousness?
# of Teachers
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
No Answer
Increased
Stayed the Same
Decreased
Movement of Knowledge
2019-2021 Trenton
2020 Rahway Cohort 1
2020 Rahway Cohort 2
2022-2023 Trenton


Pre-Test: Strategies to Use in Classroom
# of Teachers
0
2
4
6
8
10
12
No Answer
None (0)
Basic (1)
Competent (2)
Proficient (3)
Advanced (4)
Rubric Score
2019-2021 Trenton
2020 Rahway Cohort 1
2020 Rahway Cohort 2
2022-2023 Trenton

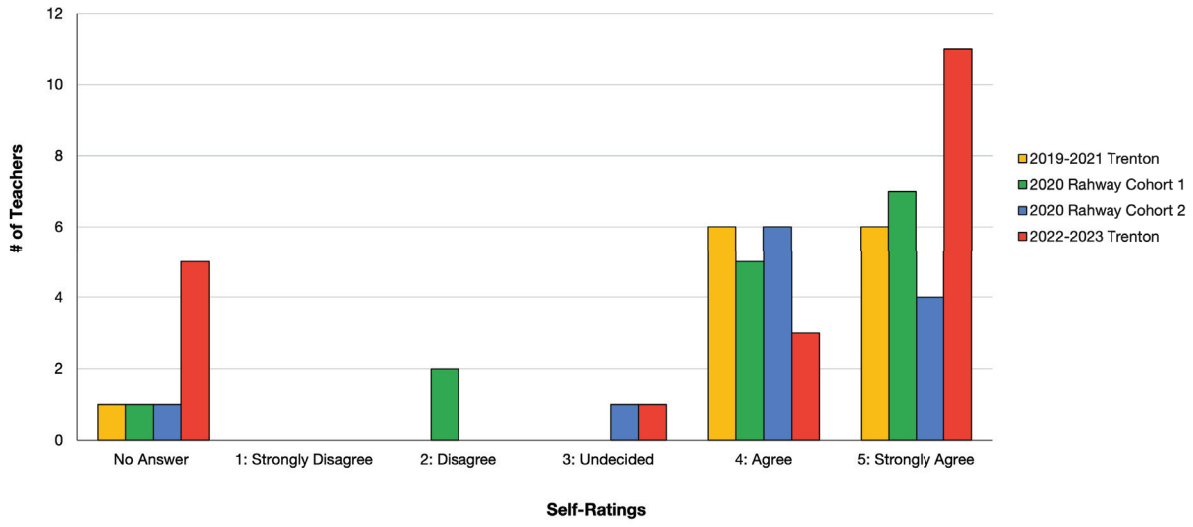

Post-Test: Strategies to Use in Classroom
# of Teachers
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
No Answer
None (0)
Basic (1)
Competent (2)
Proficient (3)
Advanced (4)
Rubric Score
2019-2021 Trenton
2020 Rahway Cohort 1
2020 Rahway Cohort 2
2022-2023 Trenton

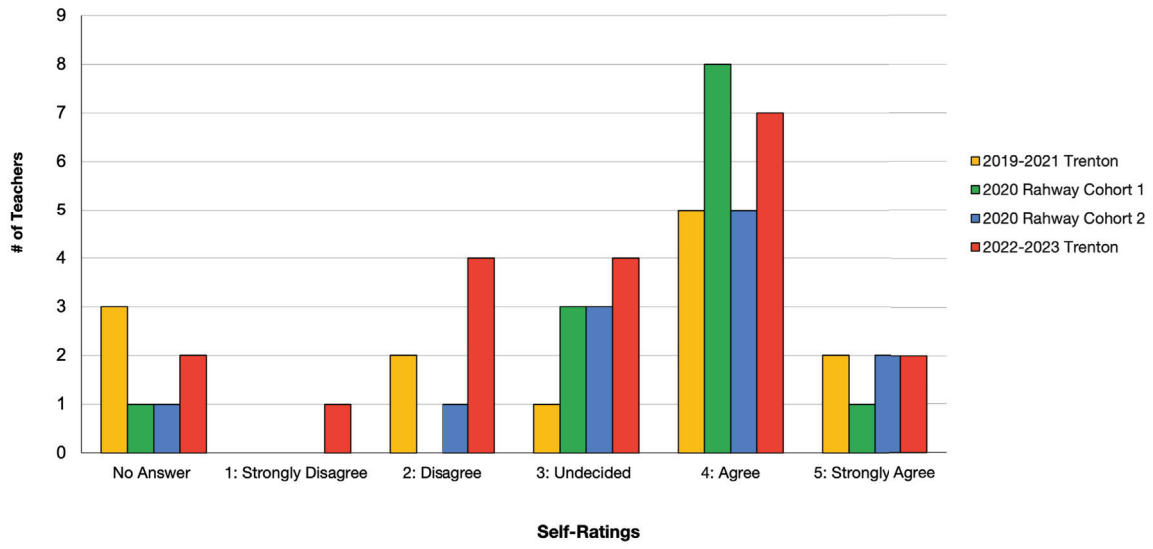

Knowledge Between Pre-Test & Post-Test:
Strategies to Use in Classroom
# of Teachers
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
No Answer
Increased
Stayed the Same
Decreased
Rubric Score
2019-2021 Trenton
2020 Rahway Cohort 1
2020 Rahway Cohort 2
2022-2023 Trenton

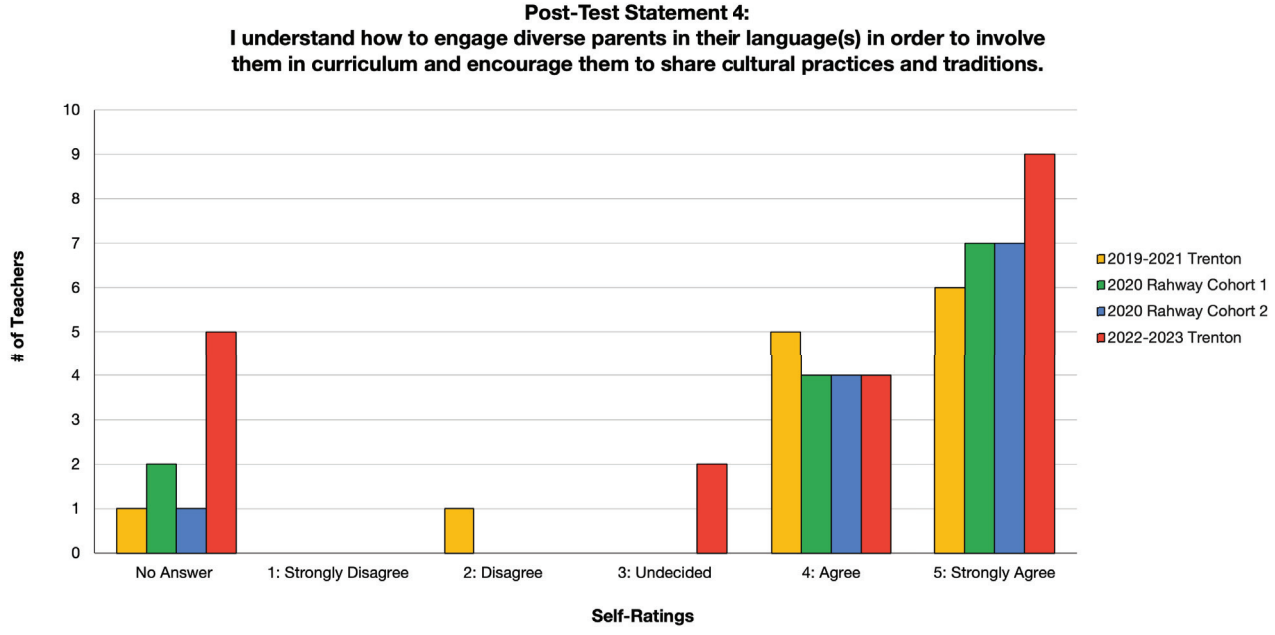
Pre-Test Statement 2:
I am confident utilizing culturally responsive practices to incorporate every child's culture(s) and language(s) into the daily curriculum and learning experiences.



Post-Test Statement 2:
I am confident utilizing culturally responsive practices to incorporate every child's culture(s) and language(s) into the daily curriculum and learning experiences.




Pre-Test Statement 4:
I understand how to engage diverse parents in their language(s) in order to involve them in curriculum and encourage them to share cultural practices an traditions.
# of Teachers
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
No Answer
1: Strongly Disagree
2: Disagree
3: Undecided
4: Agree
5: Strongly Agree
Self-Ratings
2019-2021 Trenton
2020 Rahway Cohort 1
2020 Rahway Cohort 2
2022-2023 Trenton


Post-Test Statement 4:
I understand how to engage diverse parents in their language(s) in order to involve them in curriculum and encourage them to share cultural practices and traditions.
# of Teachers
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
No Answer
1: Strongly Disagree
2: Disagree
3: Undecided
4: Agree
5: Strongly Agree
Self-Ratings
2019-2021 Trenton
2020 Rahway Cohort 1
2020 Rahway Cohort 2
2022-2023 Trenton

Coaching/Mentoring Component

Coaching/Mentorship is central to the program model and its results as mentors challenged teachers' thinking and teaching practices with critical questions and reflections. Program mentors were committed to continual professional development, peer learning and reflective practices for themselves to hone their coaching and mentoring skills. Coaches were encouraged to remain curious and used reflective questions to unlock what was already inside each teacher. According to John C. Maxwell (2014), "Questions unlock and open doors that otherwise remain closed… it is the most effective means of connecting with people; it cultivates humility; builds better ideas; gives different perspectives and challenges mindset."

The program mentors were all seasoned educators and facilitators of learning with more than 20 to 30 years of experience in various educational fields. They were experts in the art of conversation and pulling out the brilliance of each teacher assigned to them through mentoring and coaching. During virtual mentoring/coaching, mentors witnessed how the classroom environment and instructional practices were transformed from a general learning environment into intentional global learning spaces that value the culture and languages students bring to the classroom.

The coaches' goals were to raise awareness and provide resources to consider and support the implementation of best practices to address diversity as well as the linguistic repertoire of multilingual learners. During the mentorship for the four cohorts of educators that participated in the program from 2019-2023, the mentors provided 3,061 mentoring/coaching touchpoints* via text, email, mail and other face-to-face meetings. These touchpoints occurred outside of on-site mentoring classroom visits and virtual coaching sessions. Instructional practices were transformed from a general learning environment into intentional global learning spaces that value the culture and languages students bring to the classroom.

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Mentoring Touchpoints For Teachers:

The two Rahway cohorts are combined in this chart.

Touchpoint Types	2019-22 Trenton (Cohort 1)	2020 Rahway (Cohort 2 & 3)	2022-2023 Trenton (Cohort 4)	All Cohorts Together
Email	376	313	99	**788**
Face-to-Face	2	1	35	**38**
Mail	16	25	2	**43**
Phone	19	15	16	**50**
Text	1,912	0	230	**2,142**
Total	**2,325**	**354**	**382**	**3,061**

2019-2022 Trenton: Supportive Calls & Visits	
In-Person Visits Pre-COVID-19	20
In-Person Mentoring Hours	48
Supportive Phone Calls	91
Virtual Coaching Sessions	19
Virtual Coaching Hours	45
Total Intervention Hours for Participants	**146**

2022-2023 Trenton Cohort: Mentoring Visits Summary	
Technical Assistance Visits (Year One)	18
Technical Assistance Hours (Year One)	29
Mentor Visits (Year Two)	51
Mentoring Hours (Year Two)	45
Total Intervention Hours for Participants	**74**

First Year of COVID-19: Working with Trenton Public Schools Cohort 1 (2019-2022)

Since 2016, the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Institute and Mentoring Program has partnered with the Trenton Public Schools to mentor 111 teachers (eight cohorts) and 51 leaders from 21 schools. As of November 2021, the Trenton School District had 3,989 ELLs –this number has tripled since 2014 (Iturbides & Morales, 2021). In 2019, the Trenton School District contracted with the Watson Institute for professional development and on-site coaching visits for 15 teachers who attended the three-day learning institute, which consisted of 21 hours of professional development and active planning, before returning to their classrooms as culturally conscious and responsive educators. Thirteen teachers entered the mentoring cycle. Some teachers received one to two in-person mentoring visits prior to the governor's executive "Stay at Home/School Closure Order." Coaching and mentoring then continued via the Zoom platform and was extended for two consecutive years. Mentors focused on culturally responsive practices but, most importantly, paid close attention to the well-being of teachers and their students in this unprecedented transition. Self-care and managing emotions during the quarantine dominated discussions. Given the many unknowns that taxed teachers professionally and personally, we could not measure teachers' bandwidth to focus on this program. Still, we were pleasantly surprised by the outcomes and the creativity of teachers in connecting with students using their culture and languages and adopting cultural and linguistically responsive strategies in a virtual learning environment.

The educators in this cohort taught in kindergarten to twelfth-grade classrooms in seven different schools (Daylight Twilight High School, Grace Dunn Middle School, Monument Elementary, Mott Elementary, Restorative High School, Trenton Central High School and Washington Elementary). In participating classrooms, students spoke six languages (English, Spanish, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole and Urdu). This group of educators was as diverse as their students, where teachers represented countries of origin/heritage that included the United States (specifically North Carolina and Virginia), Cuba, Germany, Puerto Rico and the United Kingdom. The educators spoke up to two languages (English and Spanish), and there were twelve female teachers and two male teachers in this cohort (see chart on page 11).



Trenton's Cohort #1: (2019-2022)

TRENTON

2019-2021

Cohort #1





















LEARNING

TOGETHER





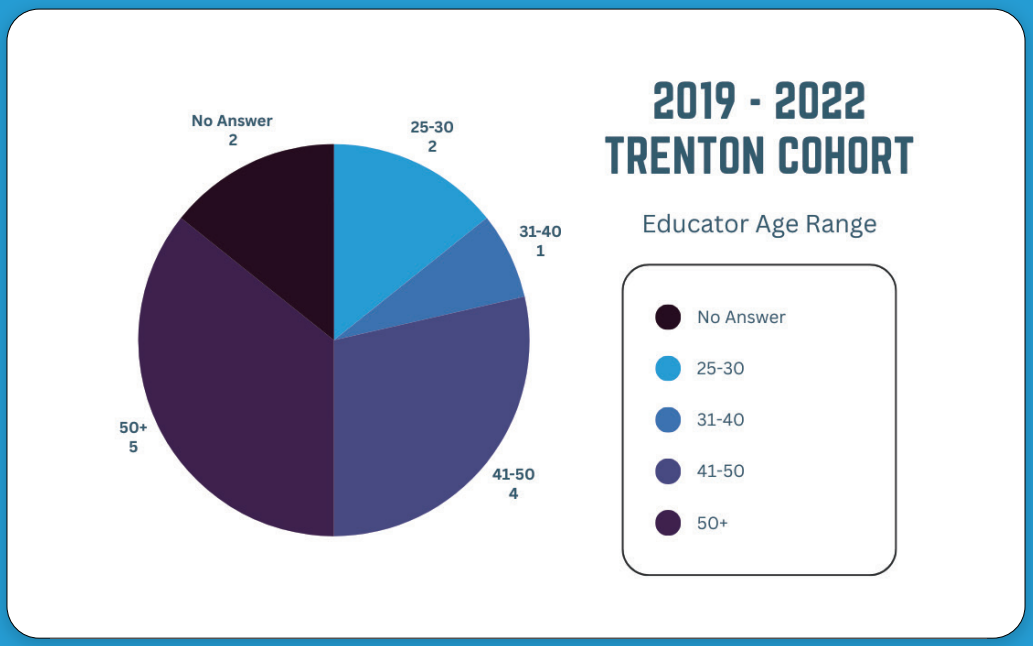












Results of the Mentoring Program:

The traditional mentoring program began in early February 2020, with 19 face-to-face visits totaling 48 hours of coaching with students and educators present was completed before the shutdown. Immediately following the shutdown, in March 2020, this cohort was surveyed to see what their needs were and what adaptations should be made to the culturally responsive program. The program then transitioned into virtual coaching sessions that did not include students. All in-person and supportive visits were funded by the district, and through special funding from several foundations, teachers received supportive calls which were held via Zoom, or phone calls, from March to August 2020 (six months). We provided 41 supportive calls during this time to the teachers willing to continue in the program. Teachers expressed gratitude to their mentors as they were an added shoulder to lean on and a thinking partner during those challenging times. Some teachers reported that colleagues formed Zoom support groups that helped them process their feelings and discuss solutions to their everyday challenges. The monthly virtual coaching meetings aimed to provide support in the following ways:

- Help teachers navigate the stress of teaching remotely by providing an examination of options to improve the virtual learning experience for their culturally diverse students.
- Encourage the inclusion of culture and language in their teaching practices wherever possible, as there were more pressing issues at the time.
- Foster empathy for the challenges that teachers were facing in those trying times, including the lack of student engagement in virtual settings, their own limited technological skills in navigating online classrooms, and finding a balance in their personal and professional lives.
- Enable teachers to support the educational, social emotional, and mental health of their students during these unprecedented times.

The analysis of the teachers' virtual coaching sessions and supportive calls led us to focus on two primary themes that show the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning for both teachers and students.

Teachers' Themes

Prioritizing Mental Health

Teachers regularly reported finding time to manage their stress through rest, relaxation, exercise and virtual socialization with family, friends and colleagues (during joint coaching sessions). Students mostly reached out to teachers after the school day, which led teachers to feel compelled to work after hours to respond to students' needs/concerns. Teachers had to learn to set boundaries for work hours to protect their mental health. The theme of prioritizing mental health provides the following data points:

- Three out of ten teachers mentioned finding work-life balance through set work hours as an issue.

- Ten out of ten teachers reported some form of stress management during COVID-19.
- Six out of ten teachers mentioned socializing with colleagues as being helpful to them in processing their feelings and troubleshooting school issues.

Personal Safety & Wellness

The unknowns of COVID-19 and returning to in-person instruction had teachers worried and stressed. Teachers reported that it was extremely difficult to deal with people they knew who had COVID-19, being sick themselves, and struggling to grieve loved ones who had passed. Ten out of ten teachers reported COVID-19 related concerns as a significant issue.

Adaptation to Virtual Teaching

Often, teachers mentioned they were not prepared or confident in their ability to engage students in a virtual setting or provide age-appropriate or individualized support to students in their home language and English. Teachers reported learning a few Spanish survival phrases to communicate with students and parents. Google Translate and Google Classroom were helpful tools for remote learning, particularly the feature that translates information into Spanish and French Creole on Google Classroom. The theme of adaptation to virtual teaching provides the following data points:

- Four out of ten teachers mentioned engagement with students in their home languages as a challenge.
- Five out of ten teachers reported that online teaching was difficult and taxing.
- Ten out of ten teachers mentioned that Google Translate was an asset to them.

The Future of Teaching

A few teachers reported taking additional professional development which helped them stay focused on teaching, improved their skills and restored their passion for teaching. Some teachers reported a lack of communication and agreement with the administration on grade policy and lesson plans/materials for teaching. This made some teachers feel isolated and under-resourced. The theme 'the future of teaching' provides the following data points:

- Five out of ten teachers found communication with the administration insufficient in terms of rules and regulations regarding curriculum, grading, learning loss and teaching.
- Four out of ten teachers mentioned professional development was helpful.
- Some teachers did not want to return to teaching and two left the field.

Students' Themes

Technology Needs

Many students needed laptops and WIFI/hotspots and had trouble using virtual platforms (Zoom and Google Classroom). Also, students struggled with microphone and camera usage, and how to remember and/or reset passwords. Five out of ten teachers reported these issues interfered with engagement and learning. Moreover, there was no way to measure if each student had their own laptop or had to share a device with siblings.

Student Engagement

Students were absent frequently, and did not use cameras or participate in class activities regularly. Students and teachers found building a real socio-emotional connection in the virtual classrooms challenging. There are no mechanisms for processing feelings and fears. Most students did not submit assignments regularly, impacting grades and skill mastery for the next grade. Some students had taken on more family responsibilities at home that prevented them from fully participating in virtual learning such as monitoring younger siblings' arrivals and departures from school and supervising siblings while parents were at work. Parents often blamed the system for their children's low grades and missed assignments. Due to these factors, students experienced learning loss. Longer periods of time in hybrid and virtual school are linked to bigger drops in learning and affected urban students the most. In the 2020-21 school year, 51% of Black and 47% of Hispanic students were remote, compared with 30% of Asian and 19% of white students in the state. "Many high-poverty districts (such as New Brunswick, Paterson and Newark) lost more than a full year's worth of grade-level learning between 2019 and 2022" (Koruth, 2024).

The theme of student engagement provided by the participating teachers include the following data points:

- Three out of ten teachers reported increased student responsibility for siblings as an issue.
- Ten out of ten teachers reported a lack of student engagement and frequent absences.
- Three out of ten teachers confirmed the students' learning loss, their struggle to help catch them up, and a lack of socio-emotional connection between teachers and students due to remote learning that interrupted grade-level skill mastery.

BETTER TOGETHER

UNITED BY OUR DIFFERENCES



Class of 2021


Richlanders
Richlanders


Certificate of Participation
Pamela Kelly















Cultural Literacy Moment









"AWAKA" Simulation



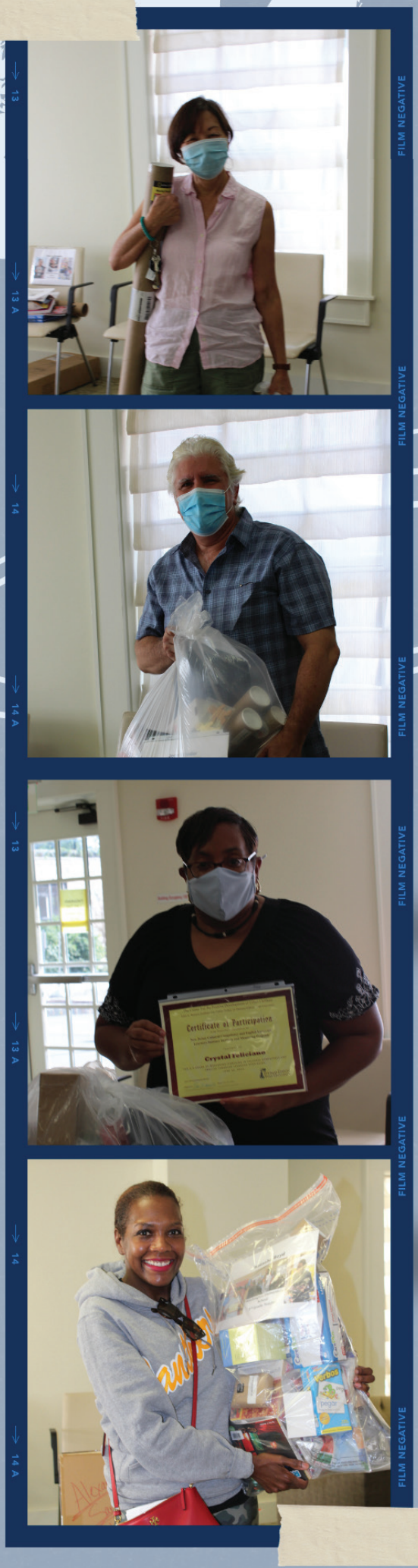




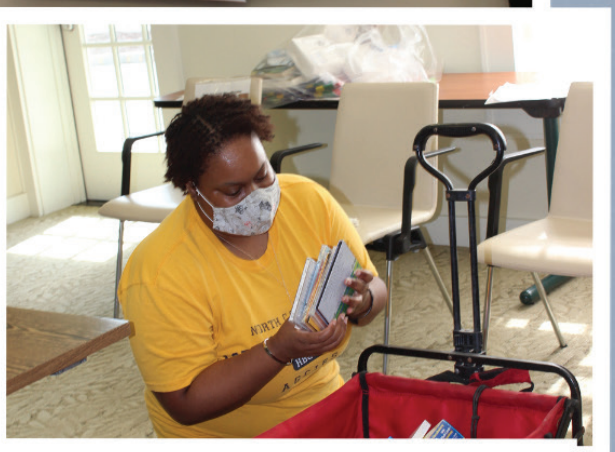
Stress, Burnout, and the Resiliency of Teachers

In the Trenton School District, Cohort #1 expressed how difficult it was to work in isolation and deal with anxiety, sometimes, without resources. Two mentors hosted joint coaching sessions with two or more teachers to build support for their mentoring teachers. The teachers enjoyed seeing each other and sharing stories of resilience and vulnerability during that time. In Cohort #2 of the same district, there were three teacher resignations, linked to burnout and chronic stress. Two of these resignations were leaving the field of education altogether. According to Baker et al. and the New Orleans Trauma-informed School Learning Collaborative (2021), "Chronic stress at work, combined with a lack of support and resources, can lead to professional burnout. Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of inefficiency." COVID-19 prompted teachers to be very creative in engaging students and families. It was fascinating to observe and document the innovation that school administration and teachers displayed to connect with students and families. In the Trenton district, staff organized drive-thru parades at the schools where parents could pick up work packets, supplies, snack boxes and information on staying healthy. Some teachers conducted at-home porch visits to see students and encourage them with smiles, goodies and work packets.

> *"Chronic stress at work, combined with a lack of support and resources, can lead to professional burnout."*
>
> SCHOOL LEARNING COLLABORATIVE











STRENGTHENING SUPPORTS WITH CULTURAL TOOLBOXES

THE STORY OF TRAILBLAZER TEACHER:

Crystal Feliciano

Trenton Central High School



MS. CRYSTAL FELICIANO is a business education and finance teacher at Trenton Central High School in Trenton, New Jersey, and a councilwoman for the city of Trenton. She has been teaching for over 18 years and has a gift for connecting with her students and community. Crystal remembers the COVID-19 years vividly from personal and professional experiences. When interviewed for this publication, Crystal shared how difficult it was to move from face-to-face instruction to remote learning, to hybrid format, and the return to face-to-face instruction. She recalled it was particularly challenging for the Spanish-speaking students. During this time, there was also an influx of students who did not speak English. On the Zoom platform, students were not consistently participating and motivating students who did not have laptops and internet access was extremely difficult. Students were popping in sporadically and not following through on submitting assignments. During the interview, Crystal shared:

"It was challenging to plan lessons to keep English-speaking students engaged and a double challenge to keep non-English-speaking students engaged, too. I am not the kind of teacher who would leave the non-English-speaking students sitting, doing nothing. My responsibility was to figure out how to do this for both student populations. The New Jersey Cultural Competency English Language Learners Institute and Mentoring Program made me more aware of the students in my classroom and how I could get to know them better. I did a 'Getting to Know You Survey.' The survey told me about the students' parents, siblings, and where their people are from."

This survey that Ms. Crystal conducted gave her information on the 25 students assigned to her two business classes. She learned that 16 were Hispanic, seven were African American, one was Haitian, one was from an African country, five were ESL students and 16 spoke or heard Spanish at home. Ms. Crystal's survey also showed that 18 students were on a college track and six students would be entering the workforce after graduation. The survey also inquired about the students' future career aspirations that included zoologist, lawyer, business owner, accountant, mechanic, law enforcement, accountant, etc. Ms. Crystal mentioned that she didn't just want to know her students better, but she also wanted to pull their cultural wealth into her teaching. Pre-COVID-19, she created a bulletin board in her classroom titled, "Our History is No Mystery." The board showed the countries, clothing and flags represented by the students and the money they used in their countries of origin. When the students came into the classroom, they felt comfortable seeing this bulletin board where they were all represented. Then, the class moved to online



learning, and the teacher asked about the entrepreneurs in their country of origin. They discussed businesses in those countries and compared them with businesses in the United States. They even talked about Black Wall Street, which is a historical place and event that students seldom learned about. Ms. Feliciano conducted a "Christmas Around the World" project in which each student explored four different countries and created a Google Slideshow with their findings. Additionally, she used the instruments from her cultural toolbox to demonstrate musical renderings from Spain and Puerto Rico. Ms. Feliciano continues to use Google Translate to incorporate the home language, Spanish, into her instruction and interactions with students. Ms. Feliciano continues to think of various ways to create projects that allow students to learn about their home cultures and others' cultures. She expressed excitement about incorporating more cultural activities into her instruction as the school year continued.

The program's mentoring/coaching component helped her to continue thinking about diving further into cultural topics as well as integrating them into her arts integration training to provide a well-rounded experience for students. Ms. Feliciano assigned an essay in which her students reacted to the presidential inauguration ceremony featuring several women of color. During the 2021 Presidential Inauguration ceremony. Ms. Feliciano asked her classes about their reactions as students of color to seeing women of color featured during the ceremony. Many of her students focused on the National Youth Poet Laureate – Amanda Gorman (African American) or singer Jennifer Lopez (Puerto Rican) because they share similar cultural heritages. She felt the assignment was very successful and inspired cultural conversation. When I asked Crystal why she goes the extra mile to connect with the students, Ms. Crystal stated, *"It is a part of my personality to want to help my students anyway I can, and I check in with them as often as possible. Word has gotten out that Ms. Feliciano is a cool teacher and a safe place to support whatever you need. It is also due to this program that has opened my eyes and a door for me to see my students using cultural lenses. If I want them to be successful, I must show up differently for them. Because I teach finance, I give students transactional tasks, like those you find in the business world. I will give extra credit to students that translate for their classmates and show up for school with their cameras on, ready to learn."*

The most demanding and deep times for Crystal were when she had to pull it together after the loss of loved ones, so she could teach online. Even while having COVID-19 herself, she had to find mental peace that life goes on to stay positive for her family and students. Crystal found ways to extend grace to



everyone during a difficult time that brought death, destruction and confusion. In addition, Ms. Feliciano expressed her exhaustion with the emotional pain in relation to George Floyd's incident and the aftermath of looting and protests that followed the incident of racial unrest, which was compounded by the COVID-19 quarantine. All teachers were dealing with a roller coaster of emotions that could not be ignored as they coped with the COVID-19 years and provided support to each other as well as to their students. It was a stressful and unprecedented time that tested everyone personally and professionally. Crystal shared: *"One day you're in, and one day you're out. One day your kids are well, and one day, they are ill. One day, people are happy, and one day they are afraid. There was a whole lot of push-through, and I had made it a point to be open, honest, and provide clear communication, which took my students a long way in dealing with their own feelings and fears. Students felt comfortable sharing their fears with me about the things that were happening in and out of school, which allowed me to provide support and assistance. I recalled having a child study meeting with the uncle of a student. I shared that I used Google Translate, a pocket-talk device that translated from English to Spanish, and I also used the Google Docs feature to translate my instructions/ assignments into the students' preferred languages. The uncle said, "I love you, and I want more teachers to be like you." The uncle further shared he only heard bad reports from the other teachers, which was very frustrating for him."*

Students were often ill, dealing with COVID-19, missed their friends and the school routine, and had lost loved ones due to COVID-19. Ms. Feliciano also lost loved ones, and she had to put her grief on a shelf to be fully present for her students. She lamented missing the opportunity to have lunch with students and personal conversations that remote learning took away. In addition, Crystal shared that after losing three family members/friends to COVID-19 and other illnesses, she became more adamant about insisting students wear masks, encouraged them to wash their hands frequently, and provided a sense that the pandemic was real, and everyone had to be careful.

Teachers had an array of responsibilities that they had oversight over, but Ms. Feliciano anchored herself in what she learned during the cultural program to get to know her students more deeply. She

> *"It is a part of my personality to want to help my students anyway I can, and I check in with them as often as possible."*
>
> CRYSTAL FELICIANO



even found ways to include diverse leaders in the community by inviting them to attend a Zoom class aimed at inspiring students to become future entrepreneurs. Crystal shared that the program was *"…an excellent eye opener and life changing for me. I often remember the video shared during the professional development of students feeling disconnected in a classroom where only English was spoken. It made me want to step out of my comfort zone and reach even further to help my students. I want them to know I see who they are, and I want to meet them where they are."* The mentor stated in her report that she was very impressed with how Ms. Feliciano incorporated culture in her lessons with activities focused on different currencies, budgeting across cultures, international entrepreneurs, and international companies and brands. Ms. Feliciano created a caring and reciprocal win-win situation for her students, and she got buy-in from them in the most challenging time of their young lives. Ms. Feliciano is an exceptional teacher who was recently promoted to teacher leader with the Trenton Public Schools.

THE STORY OF TRAILBLAZER TEACHER:

Yvette Bishara

Mott Elementary School



MS. YVETTE BISHARA is an ESL teacher at Mott Elementary School with 15 years of experience in education. She provides English language support to students in second to fifth grades. Ms. Bishara has always thought about culture and certainly has used home language to support her ESL students, but she appreciated how the cultural program helped her embed strategies into the curriculum, particularly in the literacy area. Pre-COVID-19, Ms. Bishara's classroom had bilingual labels with pictures throughout the room. Images of African and Latino leaders were posted on the walls, and multicultural music was used as students did their seatwork. The culturally inspired music was selected by the students and was from the countries of Guatemala, Honduras and Puerto Rico. The teacher also used one-on-one support and small and large group instruction to assist students in increasing their proficiency in the English language. Ms. Bishara also utilized a few survival phrases in Spanish to connect with Spanish-speaking students. She knew enough Spanish to use it in content and directions interchangeably. As Ms. Bishara shifted from face-to-face instruction to an online platform, she shared with her mentor how exhausting it was to manage Google Classroom, integrate Zoom, and give every student what they needed. She believed that virtual platforms lack human connection and that getting students to log on was difficult. Ms. Bishara recalled a student that does not have a mother, and she noticed the sadness of this child. Her compassion for this child, other students who had an array of issues, and parents who were often essential personnel made her want to support the students/families even more. Because she knew that many parents were not technology-savvy, she would take what was on the district's website and text it to her parents every week so they could be informed about school and other community resources for food and health services. The district organized "wave parades" where parents could drive by selective buildings and get homework, supplies and other goodies. Ms. Bishara ensured her parents knew about the parades and other community resources through her weekly text. She also expressed gratitude for the program that was extended through the summer and early fall to support teachers virtually. Ms. Bishara shared, *"It was great to have someone you can trust to listen to you as you try to figure out solutions to various challenges during remote learning. I enjoyed having a sounding board in developing lesson plans and support while navigating this ever-changing remote teaching environment."*

As an ESL teacher, Ms. Bishara is responsible for supporting 75 non-English-speaking students at least once or twice a week. Her lessons during the pandemic were language-related, and she helped students cope with their fears and understand the transitions taking place due to COVID-19. She would use sentence starters, story frames and poetry to help students process their situations and feelings such as, "What is happening in



> *"It was great to have someone you can trust to listen to you as you try to figure out solutions to various challenges during remote learning."*
>
> **YVETTE BISHARA**

your life right now?" Some students expressed their lack of understanding of empty streets, people being ill and fear of having to repeat a grade. These prompts were also translated into Spanish so all students could participate, such as: "I am worried…I am confused…" Below are a few examples of the students' responses:

- *"I am worried because I may have to repeat the third grade."*
- *"I am worried because my mom is having a baby."*
- *"I am worried because I don't want to get COVID."*
- *"I am confused when I read English words in a book."*
- *"I am confused when I see so many people sick."*
- *"I am confused because the streets are empty."*



In addition, students wrote their own poetry. One student wrote six poems, and Ms. Bishara was happy they were making advances in their writing. Differentiated lessons were used for each grade level and for non-writers, which validated the students' experiences and journey. Also, students were given the option of telling the teacher their sentence orally or drawing it. There are various proficiency levels among the ELL students and the teacher offered a variety of ways students could demonstrate what they knew. Ms. Bishara could see the learning lags but was not sure how to catch students up academically in the brief time she had with each group as she provided both pull-in and push-out services and support. Some students wrote poetry and added images that amplified their experiences and journeys. The students' feedback was great, and it was rewarding to hear that students were making connections. Ms. Bishara took many courses to deal with stress management during COVID-19, such as online ballet and African dance, computer coding, and she would even run track. Ms. Bishara shared, *"It is great to have someone you can trust to listen to what you were going through personally and professionally. Someone who you could brainstorm with about teaching online and the challenges of student engagement and learning lags."* During these shared mentor and teacher brainstorming sessions, ideas for incorporating culture were formalized and resources shared, like a bank of bilingual videos on children's inventors/heroes and cultural activities that could be facilitated on Zoom and Google Classroom. The online platform had its challenges, but she was discovering new information and strategies every day to improve the virtual teaching environment. Students often had too much background noise, for example: a baby crying, music playing and people talking during the class period. Despite these challenges, Ms. Bishara enjoyed facilitating guided reading with the students.

2019-2021 Trenton: Supportive Calls & Visits	
Number of Telephone Calls	91 calls
Hours of Supportive Visits (Virtual)	102 hours
Number of Mentoring Visits (In Person)	19 visits
Mentoring Hours (In Person)	44.5 hours
Total Supportive Calls and Visit Hours	**146.5 hours**

It really bonded them, and it helped her see what each student needed. They would have fun games and competitions using dance/music videos such as "The Phonics Man," an urban rapping learning tool that had images of children of color and *Fortnite*, used for sight word mastery. One of Ms. Bishara's personal goals was to become more fluent in the Spanish language. She pursued her goal by visiting Spain for one month and enrolled in a school to learn Spanish during the summer of 2024. She was totally immersed in Spain's culture, people and language. She learned valuable lessons during this trip abroad that have further enriched her Cultural Trailblazer experiences.

Summer Supports Linked to Learning Loss

This cohort continued virtual mentorship and supportive calls during the summer for personal and professional extended support. There were 17 summer calls completed from June to August 2020. This support was helpful as many of the teachers worked over the summer to assist students in catching up on their learning and to prevent further learning loss. An article in the *New York Times* in 2022 by David Leonhardt stated, "Children fell behind in school during the first year of the pandemic and have not caught up." The term *learning loss* describes this falling behind, or "the loss or reversal of knowledge or skills as well as forgone learning" (GAO, 2022, p. v). *The New York Times* article specifically looked at a loss in students' mathematical knowledge. It reported that students lost well over the average associated with a typical school year's learning due to remote learning. Leonhardt also found that learning loss was significantly higher among low-income, Black and Latino students than among high-income, white, and Asian students. As mentioned previously, the status of students' learning and personal lives often acted as stressors to educators; the summer supportive calls funded by the Smith Family Foundation's COVID-19 Fund sought to reduce some stress while providing support for teachers that committed to continue to support students during the summer months.

In the fall and early winter of 2020, there were a total of 20 calls between teachers and mentors. These calls were extended into 2021 because, contractually, each teacher was supposed to receive six mentoring visits in their classroom. Therefore, we provided six or more supportive calls as teachers wanted to stay connected in an isolated workplace, which totaled 13 phone calls with the educators. Teachers indicated that these calls provided a shoulder to lean on and an empathetic ear to listen to their challenges at home and in their workplace. Teachers received on average seven calls from their mentor, the length of calls was between 30 minutes to an hour. The monthly virtual coaching sessions and the supportive call narratives informed program staff of the challenges and triumphs of these cultural trailblazers.

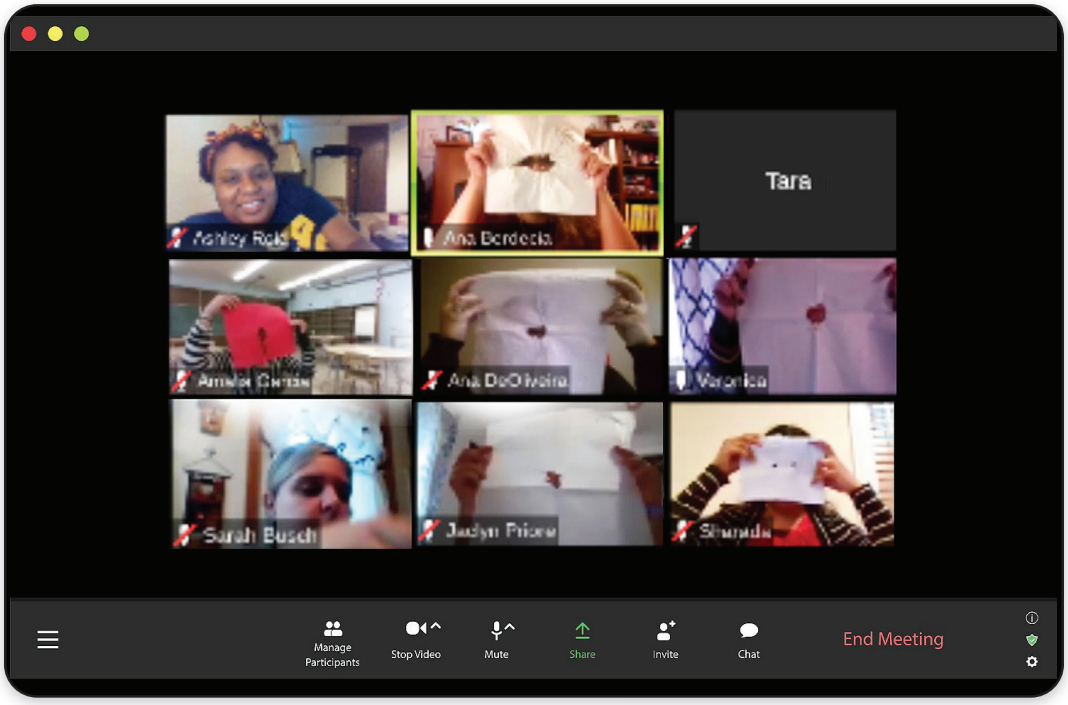


Program Mentors

Year 2 of COVID-19: Working with Rahway Public Schools Cohort 2 & Cohort 3 (October–December 2020)

2020 Rahway Cohorts Summary (October-December)

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the program's reputation earned an invitation to work with the Rahway School District. Jennifer Alphonse, the early childhood supervisor, was part of the first cohort of the New Jersey Cultural Competency English Language Learners and Mentoring Program in Trenton in 2007, when she was a teacher. As such, she invited the program to Rahway to specifically support this cohort in the middle of the pandemic when virtual professional development on a Zoom platform was the only option. This was the first time the program attempted to provide its interactive cultural program virtually, and the team was surprised to see that the simulations and discussions showed impactful insights from participants. Nothing beats in-person engagement, but the dialogue and understanding gained by participants in the virtual training were significantly rich. Twenty-five teachers were split into two cohorts of 12 and 13 teachers per group. Each cohort received three sessions of five hours of professional development, totaling 15 hours. The Rahway educators were as diverse as their students. Teachers represented nine different countries that spoke eight languages. This district works with families from diverse countries that speak 19 languages, making this training necessary to engage diverse multi-language learners. To ensure engagement, we used a mixture of lectures and simulations in the main room and small group breakout sessions for greater in-depth discussion. Most of the teachers rated the virtual training as excellent, and a few teachers rated it as a good experience. Although the program evaluations indicated the teachers learned a great deal about cultural responsiveness, there were challenges that interfered with teachers being fully engaged as active learners. These challenges were the length of the training schedule, sitting at their computers for a long period of time, being distracted thinking about the work



they would have to complete after the training was over, and finding normalcy in their new socially-distanced life. Teachers' honest feedback about what worked and did not work in the Zoom room allowed the facilitators to tweak sessions from month to month.

Overall, teachers indicated on their evaluation form that they found the training valuable and the strategies practical. Supervisor Alphonse stated, *"This is the best virtual professional development workshop I have ever participated in. I love the reflective pauses and interactive activities."* Several teachers commented that they enjoyed getting to know their colleagues better and watching them teach their cultural literacy moments, which provided them with great insight on strategies and approaches to consider for their classrooms. After working in isolation, teachers appreciated the opportunity to see and work with their colleagues even though it was in a virtual setting. These mini practicums were recorded and provided to the district as a model for other teachers to follow as they strive to become culturally and linguistically responsive educators. As each group of educators presented their cultural literacy moment, their peers shared excitement, encouragement and appreciation.

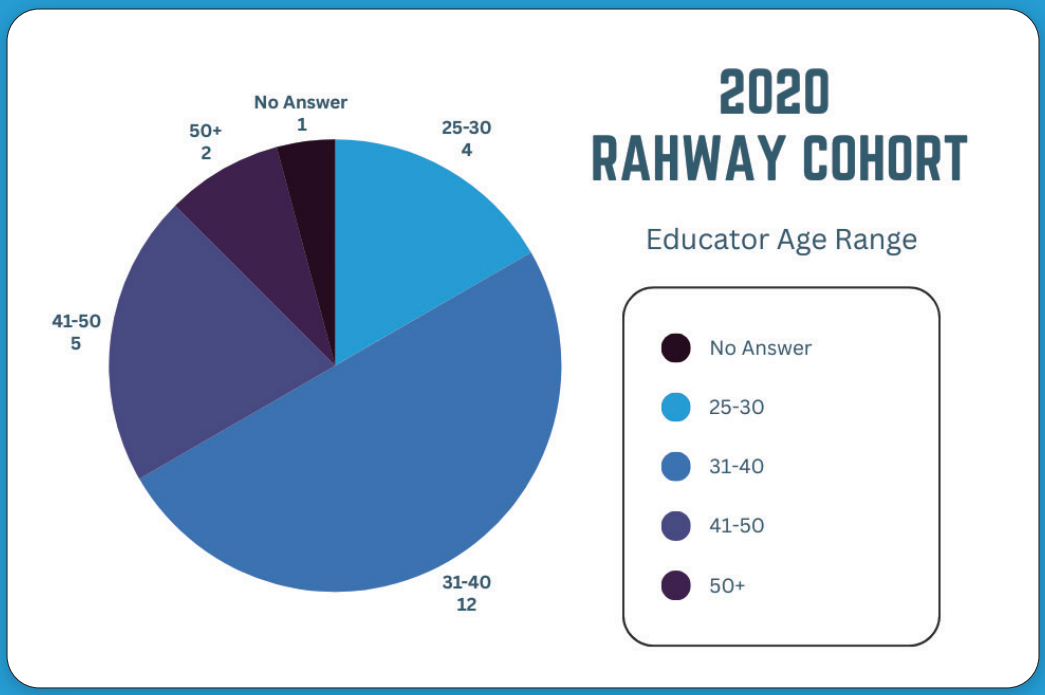
Rahway's Group 1 - Cohort #2 (October-December 2020):

This group received professional development each month from October to December 2020. All educators indicated they enjoyed getting to know their colleagues better through the "one-slide cultural introductions" and collaborating with them in the breakout rooms. They also enjoyed planning and delivering their cultural literacy moments and the AWAKA simulation which is a cultural experience that allows teachers to discover biases and strengthen connections with their peers. The discussion in breakout rooms allowed participants to talk about their biases, how to build stronger relationships with students and parents, and how to operationalize the program's 26-evidence-based strategies. Teachers shared their desire to learn more about culturally responsive teaching, particularly online, since they utilized Zoom and Google Classroom for instructions. In addition, teachers brainstormed about what to do once they returned to their virtual classrooms.

Concrete ideas such as creating multicultural literacy moments, incorporating more visuals, props and gestures in their instructions, and creating a good pace that is developmentally appropriate for multilingual learners were shared. Teachers made connections



2020 Rahway Cohort Gallery
"Zoom Sharing to Encourage and Engage Students Virtually"



between culturally responsive practices, students' cultural wealth, socio-emotional learning and family engagement which facilitated quality education for all students. They realized how all these concepts were interconnected. One teacher shared, *"We need to build stronger school and home connections to build relationships with students and families so they can see themselves in the curriculum, which will encourage students to want to learn more."* Facilitators observed shifts in teachers' thinking about how schools help students feel valued, give a sense of belonging, and learn their families' cultural journeys through curiosity and intentionality. In the mini practicums, this group demonstrated the following evidence-based strategies: Use of print in English and home languages, multicultural materials, read-aloud, co-teaching, starting slow with what students know, incorporating props, gestures, adding visuals, repetition, music and instruments, and extending cultural lessons across content areas. This cohort demonstrated 18 out of the 26 strategies learned in the professional development sessions and showed promising growth in a three-month period.

Rahway's Group 2 - Cohort #3 (November-December 2020):

This group received their professional development from November–December 2020, with one session in November and two sessions in December. The breakout room discussions focused on being more intentional with their planning time to think about culture and language and developing activities that celebrated who the students are as diverse people. There were concerns about how to get to know families without appearing to be intrusive. One teacher stated, *"No two families are the same, and we need to bridge the gap to connect with each one."* There was agreement with wanting to know more about families and asking questions without judgment. Another teacher added, *"We need to connect with the heart of the families and why parents came to the United States. We need to know their stories."* In the mini practicums, this group demonstrated the following evidence-based strategies: Use of print in English and home languages, multicultural materials, co-teaching, starting slow with what students know, incorporating props, and gestures, utilizing vocabulary in English and Spanish, and connecting the lesson content to the students' cultural wealth. This cohort demonstrated 17 out of the 26 strategies learned in the professional development sessions and showed promising growth. Despite being unable to provide on-site coaching to the Rahway School District teachers, participants received a cultural toolbox, valued at $350, with educational resources such as multicultural bilingual books, music, instruments, diverse posters and other classroom items. We hoped to return to these participants' classrooms during the next academic year to offer the regular mentoring/coaching cycle, but a change in the district's leadership prevented that from occurring. The mentoring component is the heart of the program, although the professional development aspect started educators on their journey to becoming more culturally conscious and responsive.

Year 3 of COVID-19: Working with Trenton Public School Cohort 4 (2022-2023)



Trenton's Cohort #4: (2022-2023)

Trenton's Cohort #4: (2022-2023) was composed of 22 teachers (17 females and three males) that spoke three languages (English Spanish, and Italian) from ten Trenton Public Schools (Daylight Twilight High School, Franklin Elementary, Grace Dunn Middle School, Grant Elementary, Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary, Monument Elementary, Parker Elementary, Rivera Community Middle School, Robbins Elementary, and Trenton Central High School). The educators in this cohort taught kindergarten through fifth grade, where students spoke six languages (English, Spanish, Creole, French, "Southeast Asian languages," and one unnamed language). These educators were as diverse as their students and represented countries of origin/heritage that included the United States (one teacher specified California), Bolivia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Greece, Guyana, Italy, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

2022-2023 Trenton Cohort Impact Summary

The Trenton School District contracted with the Watson Institute for a three-day learning institute (two full days and one half-day session) of twenty hours of professional development. The program's mentoring component was adjusted and split across two academic years for 18 teachers who continued in the program. The professional development included lectures, interactive simulations, and individual and group coaching. Program evaluations showed teachers enjoyed collaborating with their peers during the learning institute. This cohort of teachers faced unique challenges as they were the first cohort in our program to return to in-person instruction after experiencing the COVID-19 lockdown and tested hybrid instruction the year before. When asked if they wanted professional development to continue via Zoom, these teachers responded that they were ready to receive professional development in person as they transitioned to in-person instruction. Ten teachers wore masks during the learning institute, and 13 were unmasked. Some teachers sat together at round tables, and some sat further apart. The fears and concerns of contracting COVID-19 were still very much present. Many expressed concerns about providing education in a COVID-19 world and found it difficult to say "post-COVID-19" since there was a potential risk of being infected along with students.

TRENTON COHORT #4

















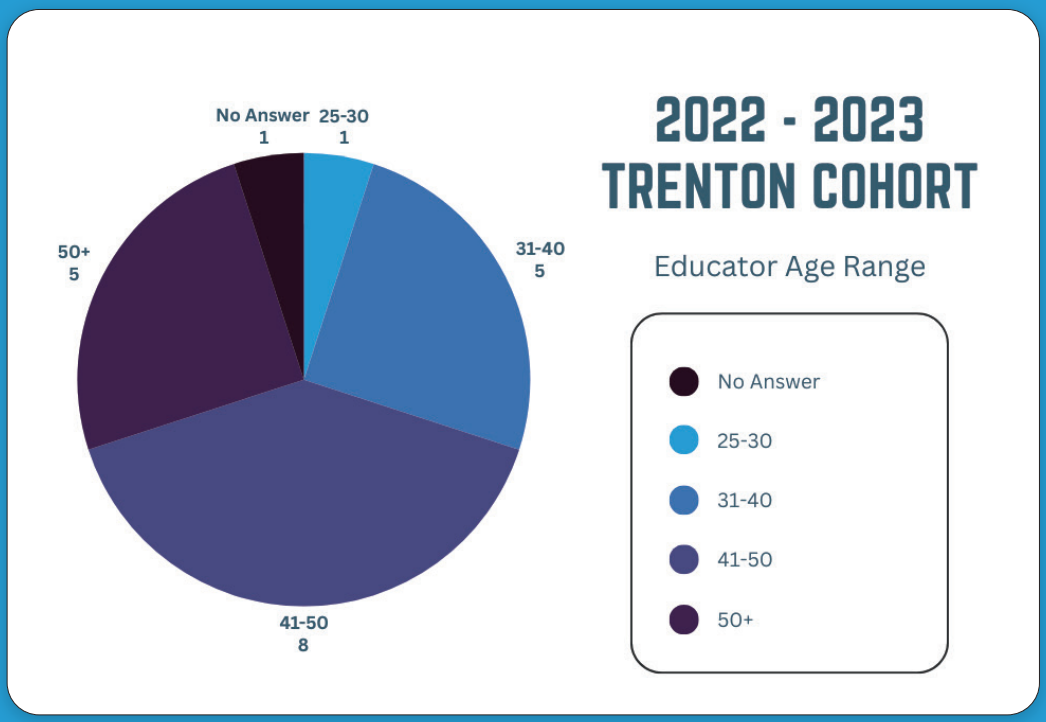










Results of the Mentoring Program:

At the beginning of the new academic year (September 2022), teachers were in new classrooms and new schools due to redistricting, which delayed the mentoring program from starting in the fall. New schools that had yet to be part of the program had to learn the purpose and goals of this intervention. Mentoring began in early February 2023 with four mentors, but by then, six teachers had dropped out of the program, two had resigned from their positions, and one teacher was promoted to vice principal. According to the district contract, each teacher was supposed to receive four mentoring visits. However, teachers received two to three mentoring visits on average due to structural/policy changes. This was not ideal as the goal was to change teachers' thinking and practices about culture and language. Some grace had to be extended as teachers transitioned from hybrid learning to in-person instruction. During these COVID-19 years, many lessons were learned, with the major lesson learned to remain flexible and adapt to the needs of the teachers and the districts.

During the first year of the mentoring, 18 out of 22 teachers received an on-site technical assistance visit to collect baseline data through pre-assessment and active planning for the following year, totaling 29 hours of coaching. Mentors reported teachers were still thinking about what changes could be made to their classroom design and instructional practices. According to Peterson, Baker, and Weber (2010), developers of *The Stage of Change Scale*, "[Teachers] are less motivated when the reason for change is not well understood. It is only when change is accompanied by internal motivation, choice, and social support that substantial and lasting change occurs." During the program's second year, ten teachers received ongoing mentoring, totaling 46 hours of coaching in culturally responsive practices. Teachers received a total of 75 hours of coaching/mentoring in culturally responsive practices between the two years of this intervention. Given the high intensity of the COVID-19 lockdown, teaching and health concerns, it is reasonable to expect a low program retention rate from year to year.

The lack of continuity in the program impacted the results of the assessments. However, some gains in culturally responsive practices were observed and documented through photo evidence and demonstrated the adoption of strategies learned during the three-day learning institute. Mentors reported the following strategies observed: multicultural photos and posters were displayed, and labels/print were used in English and the students' home languages. Classrooms had world maps and international flags that celebrated the diversity of the students (classroom design). In addition, teachers added multicultural music and incorporated aspects of the students' cultures and languages into the daily interactions and activities. Teachers encouraged students' participation regardless of proficiency level to create a deeper bond with them by allowing students to show what they knew in their home languages and supported their attempts to use English (instructional strategies). Mentors' narratives noted an increase in teachers' awareness and empathy toward multilingual learners (teacher rhythm and temperament). These strategies fostered unity, cultural confidence and safety.



Number of Mentoring Visits	Total Mentoring Hours	Teacher Participation (COVID-19 Year 3)
51 visits	75 hours	22 received P.D. 18 received one TA visit (first year) 10 continued mentoring (second year) 8 teachers completed the program

The Results of a Small Cohort of Eight Teachers:

The Culture and Language Assessment Five-Point Scale was administered twice to eight teachers who consistently continued in the intervention. This lapse between the professional development sessions and the technical assistance visits in the first year did not support teachers who had doubts about implementing culturally responsive practices. For those who grasped the concepts and their impact, substantial evidence of adopting culturally responsive practices was observed. Through mentors' reports, the findings showed teachers adopted several program strategies across three domains of classroom design, teacher rhythm and temperament, and instructional strategies. Despite the challenges of returning to in-person instruction, teachers demonstrated interest, buy-in, and a desire to explore culturally responsive practices. Each teacher showed steady progress in implementing the 26 evidence-based strategies. Two teachers excelled by increasing their scores by one point on the five-point scale across the three domains, while other teachers increased by one point on the five-point scale across select categories. The most significant program strategies observed were doubling the message by utilizing props and gestures that included cultural assignments that allowed students to showcase their cultural pride and traditions. Significant improvements were observed in the disposition of teachers (the rhythm/temperament and demonstration of empathy), especially in those classrooms where students had experienced learning loss. Teachers developed learning communities to support students with a sense of belonging to teach and create empathy between students and their experiences as English language learners (ELLs). Several teachers involved parents in a meaningful way by inviting parents to cook cultural dishes for the classroom, dressing their children in cultural clothing for cultural heritage events, and assisting with cultural projects. In addition, teachers made sure that important school information was offered in both English and the parents' preferred language.

Moreover, teachers employed the strategies of co-teaching, co-decision-making, one-on-one, small group instruction, and interaction in various languages to provide differentiated learning, support and empathy for ELLs. This allowed students to participate in all activities regardless of their proficiency level, proving to be a crucial strategy that ensured that students remained in school until graduation, a risk that continues to be present in the lives of many diverse students. The program strategies provided educators with the tools to create a culturally responsive environment that ignited their creativity as educators. These efforts encouraged students to come to school for academic gains while making room for their cultural wealth.








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Growing TOGETHER

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning













ASSIGNMENT | DR. BY | CH. BY | RATING

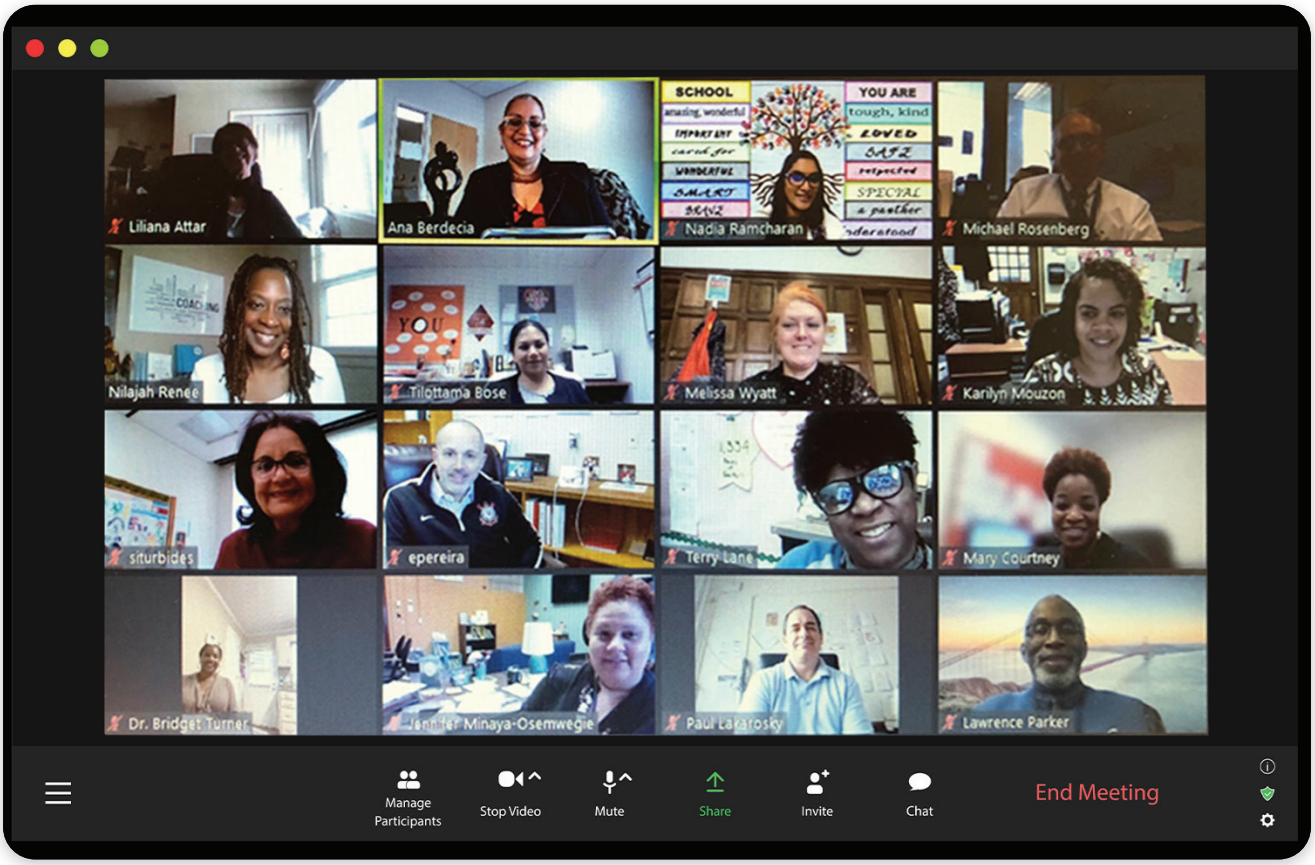
Napkin simulation so accurately reflects my inability to look into their inner atomosphere of students. Only when we are culturally responsive, we can see who they are and can get to walk in their shoes for a while. The information gained for walking in their shoes can be the seed for innoration for lesson planning.



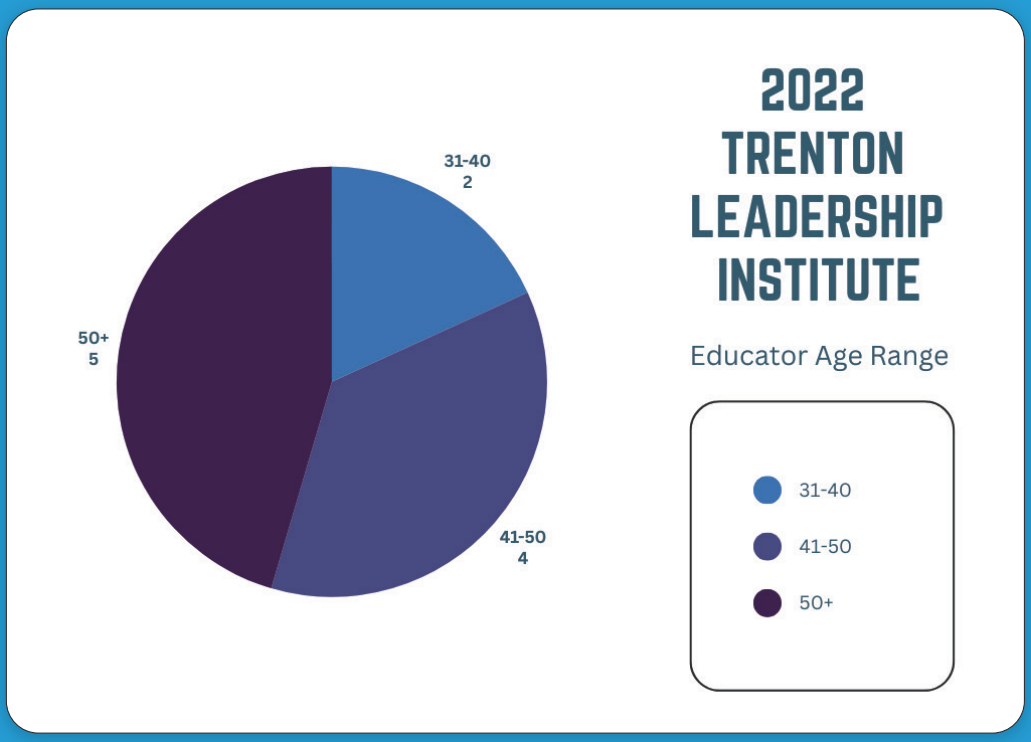




2022 Trenton Leadership Institute



The New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learner Institute and Mentoring Program has always offered two tracks, one for educators and one for leaders. There were no leadership institutes offered during the pandemic until 2022, in which we offered a virtual leadership institute on Zoom to the leaders in the Trenton School District. The leadership institute was composed of 12 school leaders whose countries of origin/heritage included: the United States, Ireland, Scotland, England/the United Kingdom, Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil, India and the Dominican Republic. These educators spoke six languages (English, Spanish, Hindi, Bengali, French and Portuguese) and taught in schools that included one elementary school (K-5), middle schools and high schools. Leaders received three sessions totaling nine hours of professional development and a school walk-through with one of our program coaches to continue discussing best practices. The Institute covered topics that included culturally courageous conversations about race utilizing the work of Glenn E. Singleton, and culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy with the work of Dr. Sharroky Hollie. These books were gifted to the school leaders and referenced during leadership institute sessions. Leaders also experienced two simulations, one, a cross-cultural communication activity called AWAKA, and another on the affective filter of ELLs. Additionally, an intensive coaching module was part of the last session to help leaders utilize reflective questions to encourage their teachers to adopt culturally responsive practices.


2022
TRENTON
LEADERSHIP
INSTITUTE
Educator Age Range
31-40
2
41-50
4
50+
5
31-40
41-50
50+



Participating Schools

Cohort #1 Trenton Public Schools (2019-2021)
Clara Parker Elementary School
Daylight Twilight Alternative High School
Grace A. Dunn Middle School
Ulysses S. Grant Elementary School
Monument Elementary School
Mott Elementary School
Trenton 9th Grade Academy
Trenton Central High School
Cohort #2 & Cohort #3 Rahway Public Schools (2020)
Franklin Elementary School
Madison Elementary School
Rahway Board of Education-Early Childhood Office
Rahway Board of Education-ESL/Bilingual Office
Rahway 7th and 8th Grade Academy
Roosevelt Elementary School
Saint Thomas Preschool
Cohort #4 Trenton Public Schools (2022-2023)
Battle Monument Intermediate School
Benjamin Franklin Elementary School
Caroll Robbins Elementary School
Clara Parker Intermediate School
Daylight Twilight Alternative High School
Dr. Crosby Copeland Elementary School
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School
Grace A. Dunn Middle School
Luis Muñoz-Rivera Elementary School
Trenton Central High School
Ulysses S. Grant Intermediate School

Conclusion

During the COVID-19 years (2019-2023), Kean University and its partners have supported the continuation of the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Institute and Mentoring Program, a 16-year evidence-based teacher intervention. During this period, the program provided a culturally responsive program to four cohorts of teachers and one cohort of leaders in Trenton and Rahway School Districts impacting 53 educators and 18 school leaders. Program participants received 80 hours of professional development and 146 hours of coaching to raise awareness of the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students in preschool to twelfth-grade classrooms. Participants examined 26 evidence-based strategies that helped them become more culturally conscious and responsible to diverse students. Many program pivots were made to the program's original design to facilitate discussion and adoption of classroom practices that allowed the classroom design, teachers' dispositions and instructional strategies to be culturally relevant and empowering to students who spoke another language other than English at home and represented many global communities.

Program pivot included: Zoom learning institutes, virtual coaching, supportive telephone calls and cultural toolboxes valued between $300-$500. One of the major changes in the mentors' and teachers' interactions was a focus on health and well-being as well as work-home balance. COVID-19 should have prevented these educators from focusing on culturally responsive practices given the priorities at hand, but many teachers used the availability of a mentor and culturally responsive practices to engage their students virtually and receive support from an educational thinking partner. Teachers reported how they appreciated having a mentor as a shoulder to lean on as they faced many unprecedented situations such as lack of technological skills/support, challenges with student/family engagement, lack of connection with administration/colleagues, and meeting the needs of their own family. Some teachers lamented not being able to mourn those who had perished because of COVID-19 and not being able to attend funerals/celebrations of the lives of loved ones. Others felt taxed by extended hours and attempting to be available to students so that their students would not fall between the gaps. Learning loss and trying to help students meet the skills mastery for the next grade was a burden that many teachers shared.

The program's operation during the pandemic taught teachers, administrators, mentors and community stakeholders many valuable lessons. One important lesson learned by the program team was how to listen and respond to the challenges of COVID-19 with empathy and to support teachers through the coaching conversations, whether it was focused on culturally responsive teaching or just getting through the day as a person experiencing a collective trauma. Another lesson was to remain flexible and provide more time for listening, keeping an open dialogue to prevent teacher burnout and chronic stress, and having courageous conversations about race and equity in real-time with teachers and school leaders.

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, the program participants showed significant changes in how teachers think and adopt culturally responsive practices. According to the pre-tests, participants from all cohorts identified their knowledge during professional development as basic. However, the post-test ratings demonstrated a shift in teachers' knowledge from basic and competent to proficient and advanced. This upward trend in the data would also later be reflected in mentors' reports and final program evaluations. During the mentoring component, mentors provided 3,045 touchpoints via text, email, mail and telephone calls to stay connected and supportive of their assigned teachers. These touchpoints were in addition to the face-to-face on-site visits (pre-COVID-19) and the virtual coaching sessions that occurred during the lockdown. The teachers in Zoom cohorts adopted 17 out of 26 strategies as they created their virtual cultural literacy moments and presented them to their peers. The cohorts that received actual in-person mentoring demonstrated a one-point increase on the Culture and Language Five-Point Scale across the domains of classroom design, teacher disposition and instructional practices. Some teachers increased by one point on the five-point scale in selective categories. The strategies increased engagement with multi-language learners and diverse students by fostering unity, cultural confidence and safety for both students and educators.



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Cultural Trailblazers Researchers and Writers



ANA I. BERDECIA, M.ED.

Ana I. Berdecia, M.Ed. and Certified Coach, is the Director of the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children at the John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research at Kean University. Ana has worked in six critical areas throughout her career: support for women in crisis; early childhood education; higher education; coaching; leadership, and culturally responsive practices. Ana spent 17 years in the nonprofit sector and the last 20 years in higher education teaching and working on educational public policy at Thomas Edison State University and Kean University. At the Watson Institute, Ana examines the vulnerabilities and resilience of urban children to advance their health, well-being and educational outcomes. Her work entails policy development, professional development, research on culturally responsive practices, social-emotional learning, racial disparities, teachers' resilience/burnout, the shortage of bilingual/ESL teachers, and creating pathways for students to consider careers in teaching and social work. She has written and presented extensively on the topic of culturally responsive practices nationally and internationally. The New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Learner Institute and Mentoring Program is Ana's brainchild and was designed to inspire school professionals to have courageous conversations about race. Ana earned a master's in education with a concentration in early childhood and a bachelor's in sociology with a minor in women's studies, both from the College of New Jersey. She has a New Jersey standard teaching certificate in preschool to third grade and a post-graduate certificate in infant mental health. In Ana's spare time, she enjoys reading, writing faith-based content and spending time with her family—especially her three grandchildren.



MEGAN ELLEN OLSEN, M.A.

Megan Ellen Olsen, M.A. graduated from Kean University with a Master of Arts in holocaust and genocide studies in 2023. Before moving to New Jersey, she received a Bachelor of Arts in history and a minor in Judaic studies at Portland State University in Oregon. In the summer of 2022, she served as a graduate assistant to Ana I. Berdecia, Director of the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children at the John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research at Kean University. She also worked as a research assistant at Kean's Holocaust Resource Center, looking into the impact of female Holocaust survivors on Union County. Her studies focus on genocidal rape and other forms of sexual violence and the experiences of women in genocide. She hopes to pursue a doctorate in genocide studies, history or women's studies, continuing to focus on sexual violence in genocide and war. Megan would like to work with survivors and use the knowledge she has gained in her studies to help them. Currently, Megan is teaching social studies at Immaculate Heart Academy in Washington Township. She spends her free time with her cat, Pierce, reading about gender inequalities and painting feminist pieces. She also enjoys watching documentaries.



DARIMAR WEERT

Darimar Weert, an international student from Curaçao, graduated with great distinction in psychology from Kean University in May of 2023. She has a passion for the field of education, with five years of experience as a teacher's assistant at an early childhood development center. Currently she is pursuing a master's degree

in human behavior and organizational psychology at Kean, where she also serves as a graduate assistant at the John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research. In this role, she works closely with the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children. She contributes as a research assistant by coding and summarizing data and organizing data files so they are easily retrievable. During the Spring of 2024, Darimar led a research project for Kean University's Research Days event entitled "Teachers in the Aftermath of COVID-19" with colleague Dayana Velasco Manzano. The research focused on the needs and current status of teachers who worked during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the stressors and changes they are experiencing in their classrooms and work lives. Darimar's passion for improving working conditions for education workers and children drives her to work toward positive change in this area. This is why she hopes to use her skills and experiences to create a positive impact on the lives of others and enhance policies and working conditions for all educators in the future. In her free time, she enjoys swimming, traveling, writing stories and reading books.



DAYANA E. VELASCO MANZANO

Dayana E. Velasco Manzano is a magna cum laude graduate from Drexel University with a Bachelor of Science in film and television and a minor in Spanish. She is a passionate visual storyteller and student who is creating an intersection of communication theory and creative expression through her ongoing pursuit of a master's degree in communication studies at Kean University. In her previous roles, Dayana focused on language accessibility through her work as a Spanish-to-English translator on the documentary *Como Vivimos* directed by Aggie Ebrahimi Bazaz, and used her skills to create digital media content for the non-profit organization ChangeMakersHub, in Cape Town, South Africa. Currently, she is working with the Center for the Positive Development of Urban Children at the John S. Watson Institute for Urban Policy and Research at Kean University as a graduate assistant. Her work focuses on data collection and further research into the importance of mentorship for teachers in connection with cultural empathy, so that they can continue to cultivate a richer and more successful educational environment for students in the Garden State.

Dayana also participated in Kean University's Research Days with her colleague Darimar Weert, where they presented their report, "Teachers in the Aftermath of COVID-19." This report highlighted the stressors that teachers are experiencing daily in the classroom as a result of the pandemic and how we can open up a pathway to look for solutions that will empower our educators. Dayana's academic and professional journey is motivated by a commitment to create a space for self-expression within the communities that she has the honor to be surrounded by. Rooted in the belief that every individual deserves to feel empowered, represented and valued, she dedicates her work to hopefully be a catalyst for progress and inclusivity. In her free time, she enjoys classical music, watching movies, playing video games and learning to crochet!



ASHLEY REID, M.A.

Ashley Reid, M.A., is an invested advocate, equity trainer and facilitator, spiritual coach, writer, and community worker who brings a diverse wealth of experience and knowledge in community building, equity and inclusion culture building, and spiritual care. A Trenton, New Jersey native, Ashley holds a Bachelor of Science in print journalism from North Carolina A&T State University, Master of Arts in management from Wake Forest School of Business, Master of Divinity from San Francisco Theological Seminary, and is in the process of becoming a certified Spiritual Director through the Chaplaincy Institute Interfaith Seminary. Ashely served as the program assistant/data analyst for the New Jersey Cultural Competency and English Language Learners Institute and Mentoring Program when it was housed at Thomas Edison State University. Presently, she works for the Mortgage Bankers Association in Washington, D.C., as a DEI Program Specialist.



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