



Developing Educational Leaders in California

The 21st Century California
School Leadership Academy

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Executive Summary

California has a notable history of investing in educational leaders' professional learning. In 1983, the state launched the California School Leadership Academy (CSLA), which it funded until the academy was discontinued due to statewide budget cuts in 2003. Research showed that CSLA was a source of high-quality professional development. In 2019, the state legislature reinvested in leaders' professional learning when it authorized the [21st Century California School Leadership Academy \(21CSLA\)](#) to provide high-quality professional learning opportunities that are accessible and free of charge to California's PreK–12 educational leaders, including central office leaders, site leaders, and teacher leaders.

The statewide program is administered by the 21CSLA State Center, housed at the University of California, Berkeley School of Education, in partnership with the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Education and Information Studies and the California Subject Matter Project led by the University of California Office of the President. The professional learning is delivered through seven regional academies that offer three primary types of learning opportunities: communities of practice (i.e., cohorts of leaders in similar roles collaboratively working on problems of practice), localized professional learning (i.e., learning opportunities developed in response to regional need), and individualized coaching by trained coaches. 21CSLA is one of several lead agencies that compose the California Statewide System of Support, an important part of the state's accountability and continuous improvement strategy that is designed to help local education agencies (LEAs) and their schools meet the needs of each student they serve.

The purpose of this study was to understand how 21CSLA is meeting the professional learning needs of educational leaders, how the academy fits within the broader state infrastructure for supporting educational improvement, and how state agencies can enable 21CSLA to contribute to an effective educational leader workforce. The study is based on a review of internal and external evaluation results; materials posted on California Department of Education (CDE), 21CSLA State Center, and regional academy websites; and interviews with regional academy leaders, State Center leaders, and internal and external program evaluators.

Contributions of 21CSLA

21CSLA has expanded access to high-quality professional learning. In the first 3-year grant cycle, and despite disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, 21CSLA served approximately 8,300 leaders. Regional academies provided a total of 333 communities of practice and localized professional learning offerings and have facilitated coaching for hundreds of leaders (384 in Year 3 alone). The professional learning provided aligns with research on effective leader development that shows the importance of meaningful and authentic learning opportunities that apply learning in practice; a focus on leading instruction, developing people, creating a collaborative learning organization, and managing change; mentoring or coaching, along with feedback and opportunities for reflection; and cohort or networking structures that create a professional learning community. Communities of practice allow leaders to participate in collaborative learning; the localized professional learning provides experiences that are problem based and context specific; and coaching enables tailored support and opportunities for feedback and reflection. Furthermore, all learning activities occur over an extended period of time.

To support regional academies in implementing the characteristics of high-quality professional learning, the State Center uses evidence-based professional learning practices in its work with the regional academies, providing a model for the regional academies to re-create in their work with the county offices

of education and LEAs that they support. For example, the State Center models collaborative listening and learning by bringing together regional academy leaders and State Center staff to learn from each other; it centers equity in its gatherings; and it models relationship-building by listening to regional academy leaders and responding to needs.

Furthermore, the State Center supports the integration of research and practice by conducting original research on the 21CSLA initiative and connecting practitioners with external research on leadership development. The State Center’s original research systematically examines how TK–12 leaders learn to lead for equity, prioritizing research on leaders’ professional contexts, how 21CSLA supports their learning, and the impacts of 21CSLA professional learning on leadership practice. By examining these areas, the research team aims to support continuous improvement within the 21CSLA initiative while also contributing to the knowledge base of the broader field. In addition to making its research findings publicly available, the State Center hosts webinars that bring together academic researchers and school- and district-based practitioners to discuss timely issues in educational leadership.

21CSLA emphasizes equity to support all California students. The 21CSLA State Center and regional staff have a shared commitment to cultivating leadership for equity, which the initiative understands as leaders’ capacity to “transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.” The topics addressed through these learning opportunities aim to support leaders in working toward more equitable practices. For example, professional learning may focus on helping leaders use data to identify and address equity-related opportunity and outcome disparities that exist within their district or school site, or it may provide guidance on how leaders can address inequities that emerge in relation to specific racial, linguistic, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship, and disability-related identities of students and staff. 21CSLA also provides support tailored to the needs of leaders of color and leaders with historically marginalized gender and sexual identities. While regional academies experience challenges to their equity-forward work—namely pushback from some educational leaders and difficulties in recruiting a diverse corps of leadership coaches—the initiative has established a strong reputation as a resource for leaders looking to address disparate outcomes among different student groups.

21CSLA meets state and local needs. At the state level, 21CSLA can help leaders interpret and implement new state initiatives or priorities. For example, to support leaders in developing the foundational knowledge of child development needed to implement the state’s adoption of universal transitional kindergarten (UTK), the California Department of Education awarded \$7 million in grants to the 21CSLA State Center, which supported the development of a UTK Leadership Certificate available to candidates in a California Commission on Teacher Credentialing–approved Preliminary or Clear Administrative Services Credential program or who hold a Certificate of Eligibility. The grants also supported the development of eight professional learning modules to meet the needs of in-service leaders. In addition to this state-level work, regional academies respond to leaders’ expressed learning needs related to other state policies and priorities, such as community schools and ethnic studies implementation.

At the local level, 21CSLA regional academies conduct needs assessments through surveys, focus groups, or listening campaigns to identify the specific problems of practice faced by schools, districts, or counties. A few regional academies supplement their needs assessment with data from the state’s accountability

system, the California School Dashboard, particularly for LEAs that have been identified for Differentiated Assistance. Regional academies have also begun to work with other agencies in the Statewide System of Support to identify LEAs' leadership-related school improvement needs.

21CSLA tailors learning opportunities to enhance leaders' effectiveness. Within the general strategies of coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning, regional academy activities vary to meet the needs of leaders in their regions. For example, some regional academies target individuals, whereas others target school or district teams. Some rely on partner organizations to provide professional learning opportunities, and others provide the opportunities themselves. The variation is purposeful and encouraged so that regional academies can provide support tailored to their regional context.

21CSLA coordinates with agencies in the Statewide System of Support. 21CSLA operates as a lead agency in California's Statewide System of Support, and the initiative has begun to develop collaborative relationships with other lead agencies. At the state level, State Center leaders attend the Statewide System of Support meetings and encourage regional academy leaders to do the same. At the regional level, regional academy leaders have developed relationships and initiated collaborations with the System of Support Geographic Lead Agencies (Geo Leads) to coordinate support for their regions, although levels of collaboration vary. Multiple regional academy leads expressed the conviction that heightened collaboration would benefit the leaders that the System of Support aims to serve.

Early Evidence of Impact

Early evidence suggests that leaders value the opportunity to engage in 21CSLA professional learning and that doing so impacts their leadership practices. During the first grant cycle, the State Center commissioned two studies of 21CSLA implementation: (1) an impact evaluation conducted by RTI International that was intended to determine the effects of the initiative on student learning, and (2) an internal evaluation conducted by the Social Research Methodology Evaluation and Assessment Group at UCLA to understand the extent to which the technical assistance and support provided by the State Center is building capacity in regional academies. Findings from these evaluations show that regional academy offerings influenced participants' knowledge, skills, and practices related to evidence-based practices, continuous improvement, and equity, and they influenced positive changes for schools, teachers, and students. Regional academy leaders also reported evidence that leaders are changing how they think about their work, their students, and their communities, particularly as these understandings relate to equity. Many participants repeatedly attend 21CSLA offerings and participate in multiple types of offerings, another indication that they value the learning opportunities provided by 21CSLA.

Practices That Support Strong Implementation

There were two practices adopted early on that contribute to the overall strength of 21CSLA. The first practice involves a focus on continuous improvement. 21CSLA has been developed to respond to the evolving needs of educational leaders as well as those providing support. This responsiveness includes ongoing efforts by the State Center and the regional academies to collect information, analyze, understand, and address needs over time. These efforts have contributed to the ongoing evolution of programming to better serve leaders.

The second practice supporting strong implementation is collaboration and relationship-building. Collaboration between the State Center and state agencies—the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), State Board of Education (SBE), and CDE—helps 21CSLA maintain the balance between local and state priorities and expand its own reach through other agencies’ promotion of its work. The State Center and regional academies have established robust systems for continual communication and collaboration to compare work, share ideas and best practices, and engage in ongoing learning together. Relationships between regional academies and neighboring county offices of education and LEAs have supported needs assessments and participant recruitment.

Implications

To further strengthen the ongoing development of educational leaders, state policymakers and agency leaders can continue to support and endorse 21CSLA.

California’s leaders stand to benefit from longevity in 21CSLA operations. The initiative’s early successes are encouraging, but the need for equity-centered professional learning among educational leaders is ongoing. 21CSLA has already begun to establish itself as a go-to organization for leadership support, and its attention and responsiveness to leaders’ needs ensure that the organization will evolve as leaders face new responsibilities and challenges. Sustained operation will allow the initiative to build a lattice of systems and services that meet the needs of California’s educational leaders.

Cross-agency communication strengthens the work of 21CSLA and other leadership initiatives. CDE, CCEE, and SBE should continue to operate as active collaborators with the State Center. State agency engagement has helped 21CSLA leaders and state agency leaders share knowledge and build trust. Clear communication channels also have facilitated the alignment of 21CSLA professional learning with state priorities and a common understanding of 21CSLA’s goals and related practices.

State agencies’ amplification of the work of 21CSLA could support the initiative’s reach and access. State agencies could further support 21CSLA’s efforts by amplifying its work to LEAs, school leaders, and external school support providers in newsletters and other communications. By doing so, they can increase awareness of 21CSLA professional learning opportunities and enable the initiative to reach more leaders.

Sharing of best practices and interagency alignment can be enhanced by further strengthening collaboration between 21CSLA and other Statewide System of Support entities. 21CSLA is a key component of California’s Statewide System of Support. The State Center and regional academies have established relationships with other state and local agencies in the System of Support, but levels of collaboration vary. State agencies are well positioned to encourage interagency collaboration that can support the development of complementary practices across agencies and allow for better sharing of existing resources and expertise.

In conclusion, 21CSLA already offers multiple evidence-based activities to develop leadership talent and is deepening its work to support greater access and quality. Moving forward, 21CSLA can fill other gaps in leadership development, such as building leadership teams, supporting leaders’ supervisors, and developing content knowledge to support school improvement. With its statewide reach and strong partnerships at the state and local levels, 21CSLA is well positioned to continue building a highly qualified leadership workforce across the state.

Introduction

The state of California, through its policies and practices, recognizes the importance of educational leaders' learning. The 2013–14 Administrative Services Credential Program Standards revised the state standards that guide principal preparation, induction, and professional learning to create an aligned learning progression from classroom teacher to novice administrator to experienced administrator.¹ Following the adoption of these standards, in 2019, the state legislature authorized the [21st Century California School Leadership Academy \(21CSLA\)](#), a statewide professional learning initiative for school and district leaders, including school administrators, teacher leaders, and district administrators. Initially funded with the 3% leadership development set-aside allowed under Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act, 21CSLA is intended to expand the developmental continuum for administrators throughout California by ensuring the availability of professional learning, free of charge, to local education agencies (LEAs) that receive federal Title II funds.

The purpose of this study is to understand how 21CSLA contributes to leadership development in California. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how 21CSLA currently supports the professional learning needs of educational leaders and how it fits within the broader state infrastructure to support educational improvement. The goal of the study is to inform policymakers and program administrators about the work and accomplishments of 21CSLA during the initiative's first 3-year grant cycle and point to ways in which the state can further support 21CSLA efforts to serve California's educational leaders.

The Importance of Leadership Development

While 21CSLA serves leaders at the school level (e.g., teacher leaders, assistant principals, principals) and at the district level, much of the prior research on leader development focuses specifically on school leaders. Research has shown the importance of effective principals for students' and teachers' success.² Importantly, it also has shown that the learning opportunities principals have make a difference in their ability to realize positive outcomes for students and teachers.³

A recent study in California examined the outcomes associated with principals' access to professional development and found that the frequency and content of principals' professional learning opportunities is significantly associated with teacher retention and student achievement.⁴ Controlling for a range of student, teacher, school, and district factors, the researchers found that in addition to principals' preservice preparation (including a high-quality internship), frequent access to professional development (i.e., workshops, peer observation and/or coaching, a principal network) mattered for principals' effectiveness, as did access to content focused on managing change, leading instruction, shaping a positive school climate, developing people, and meeting the needs of diverse learners.

In this study, on average, students whose principal had received more extensive professional development (a score of 9 out of 10 on the study's professional development index) outperformed students whose principal had little access to professional development (a score of 2 out of 10 on the index). To put the size of the effect into context, the researchers translated the difference in average academic performance into days of learning. The academic benefit of being a student in a school with a principal receiving high versus low levels of professional development equated to an additional month and a half (29 school days) of learning in English language arts and almost 3 months (55 school days) of learning

in mathematics. Notably, study findings indicate that the achievement gains associated with having a principal who received extensive professional development in instructional leadership were greatest for students from historically underserved groups (Black, Latino/a, and Native American students).

Although few studies directly examine the impact of professional learning on other educational leaders, such as central office staff or teacher leaders, there is reason to believe that access to professional learning for these populations can be beneficial. For example, principals themselves benefit from strong district leadership. In a study of the factors most likely to influence principals to leave their schools, more than half of potential leavers cited unresponsiveness from the district or other support teams as a challenge.⁵ Similarly, research on the efficacy of distributed school leadership provides grounding for the ongoing development of teacher leaders' skills and knowledge.⁶

Reflecting the benefits of strong educational leaders, a number of states across the country have invested in leaders' professional learning. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes a number of leadership provisions that states have utilized. These provisions include Title I funding for high-poverty schools generally, as well as targeted funds for schools identified for intervention and improvement; Title II funding for professional development, offering states an optional 3% state set-aside for leadership development initiatives; and funding from other titles in the law for leadership development focused on particular kinds of programs. When ESSA was reauthorized in 2015, all states indicated that they would invest in educational leadership under one or more provisions of the law. An analysis of state policy plans under ESSA found that 36 states planned to invest in teacher leadership, 10 in assistant principals, 9 in strengthening school leadership teams, and 21 in induction support for new principals.⁷

Currently at least 26 states fund leadership development initiatives through which they provide professional learning to in-service leaders.⁸ While principals are the most common target audience for professional learning programs, states may also make professional learning available to other school-based leaders (e.g., assistant principals, teacher leaders) and district leaders. These initiatives, in the most general sense, develop leadership-relevant skills and knowledge; however, they often perform more specific functions too, such as providing role-specific professional learning, facilitating career advancement for aspiring leaders, supporting the induction of early-career leaders into the profession, strengthening leadership teams, providing differentiated assistance for school improvement, and training leaders in their capacity as supervisors.⁹

The History of Leadership Development in California

California has a notable history of investing in educational leaders' professional learning. In 1983, the state launched the California School Leadership Academy (CSLA), which it funded for nearly 20 years. At that time, CSLA's mission was to "develop leadership focused on teaching and learning so that each student meets or exceeds standards."¹⁰ Twelve of the state's 58 county offices of education received grants to host the CSLA School Leadership Centers. Through this regional structure, CSLA provided professional learning to principals, school teams, and other administrators across the state. In 1992, CSLA, in collaboration with the Association

California has a notable history of investing in educational leaders' professional learning.

of California School Administrators (ACSA), began to offer additional professional development for superintendents through an Executive Leadership Center. Over the course of CSLA's operation, more than 25,000 leaders participated in these programs, which offered intensive, long-term training for both individual leaders and leadership teams.¹¹

CSLA was recognized nationally as a source of high-quality professional development. One study of the program's effectiveness used a comparative case study methodology looking at 44 graduates of its 3-year training academy. Data included interviews with the graduating principal, teachers at the school, and district administrators; experiences with shadowing the principal; classroom observations with the principal, followed by a debriefing interview; teacher questionnaires; a principal questionnaire; and document review. The study found that the leadership training had a "substantial influence" on all dimensions of instructional leadership, as measured by principals' ideas and attitudes, principals' practices, school leadership structures and people, school policies, school culture, teacher beliefs, and classroom practices. Based on this finding, the researcher concluded that "the penetration of this leadership experience into the various levels of the school organization was very impressive."¹² Reflecting the strength of CSLA, aspects of the program were adopted in Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, and Texas; the Department of Defense Education Activity school system; and Australia, Kuwait, the Netherlands, and Sweden.¹³

The California Legislature appropriated \$1.5 million annually for the ongoing development and administration of the overall program and \$4.1 million for grants to the regional centers until CSLA was discontinued in 2003 as a result of statewide budget cuts.

More than 15 years later, California again began investing in educational leader development. The 2019–2020 California state budget authorized \$13.8 million in ongoing federal funds to launch 21CSLA, reestablishing the state's capacity to support its administrator workforce.¹⁴ As envisioned in 21CSLA's Impact Statement:

In partnership with the California Department of Education (CDE), the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), the State Board of Education (SBE), California Subject Matter Project, and regional academies, 21CSLA will develop a robust, equity-forward approach to expand the capacity of California leaders at all levels. Informed by improvement science, this initiative will improve instruction, schools, and districts to better meet the needs of underserved students, ultimately creating more equitable schools for historically marginalized pupil groups.¹⁵

Research Focus and Methodological Overview

This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

- How is 21CSLA meeting the professional learning needs of educational leaders?
- How does 21CSLA fit within the broader state infrastructure for supporting educational improvement?
- In what ways can state agencies enable 21CSLA to contribute to building an effective educational leader workforce?

The study was designed to complement two other efforts to evaluate 21CSLA: (1) an impact evaluation conducted by RTI International that was intended to determine the effects of the initiative on student learning, and (2) an internal evaluation conducted by the Social Research Methodology (SRM) Evaluation and Assessment Group at the University of California, Los Angeles that was intended to provide formative feedback regarding how the State Center’s provision of technical assistance and support is implemented and to what extent it is building capacity for regional academies to deliver professional learning.

We first conducted a document review, gathering and analyzing evaluation reports, materials posted on the CDE website (e.g., descriptions of 21CSLA, descriptions of the Statewide System of Support, legislation), materials posted on the 21CSLA State Center website (e.g., 21CSLA State Center publications), and materials posted on the regional academy websites. Document collection occurred between January and July 2023.

We also conducted semistructured interviews in June and July 2023 with the following 21CSLA State Center and regional academy staff:

- **Regional academy leaders.** Interviews focused on the needs assessment process, characteristics and design of the program offerings, relationships with partner entities (e.g., the State Center, other regional academies, LEAs within the geographic region, Statewide System of Support agencies), and factors that support or hinder implementation of professional learning activities.
- **State Center leaders.** Interviews focused on the State Center’s efforts to increase the capacity of regional academies to serve educational leaders, relationships with regional academies and state agencies (e.g., CDE, CCEE, SBE), the continuous improvement process, and successes and challenges.
- **Internal and external program evaluators.** Interviews focused on the scope and methodologies of the evaluations and findings related to the evolution of the program and program impact.

Together, these data sources informed an analysis of 21CSLA program design and implementation and the implications for state agencies.

Overview of Report

The following section, [21CSLA Overview](#), presents general information about 21CSLA, including its administrative structure and the types of learning opportunities it provides. The next section, [Contributions of 21CSLA](#), presents five ways in which 21CSLA is meeting the professional learning needs of educational leaders. The following section, [Early Evidence of Impact](#), discusses the positive changes 21CSLA appears to be making to principals’ knowledge and skills, as shown by internal and external evaluations, regional academy leaders’ perceptions of changes in leadership practices, and the value participants ascribe to 21CSLA. The section [Practices That Support Strong Implementation](#) delves deeper into two practices—embracing continuous improvement and building and maintaining relationships—that respondents understood as key to supporting strong implementation. The final section, [Discussion and Implications](#), offers general lessons about 21CSLA and ways that state policymakers and agency leaders can continue to support 21CSLA.

21CSLA Overview

21CSLA was established to provide high-quality professional learning opportunities that are accessible and free of charge to California’s PreK–12 educational leaders, with a special focus on novice leaders, leaders in high-need settings, and leaders involved in school improvement. Participation is open to central office leaders, site leaders, and teacher leaders from schools and districts that receive Title II funds. 21CSLA operates as a lead agency in California’s Statewide System of Support and contributes to the System of Support’s mission to address inequities in opportunity and outcomes for historically marginalized student groups by building the capacity of local education agencies (LEAs) to continuously improve teaching and learning practices over time. (See [21CSLA’s Role in California’s Statewide System of Support](#).)¹⁶

Administrative Structure and Roles

The initiative is administered by a State Center and seven regional academies. The operators of these agencies are selected through a competitive grant process in which eligibility is limited to LEAs, institutions of higher education, and nonprofit educational service providers. Grants are awarded for a term not to exceed 3 years; at the conclusion of the term, the grants may be renewed or awarded to new entities. The first grant cycle, referred to as Cohort 1, spanned 2020 through 2023, and the awardees for the second grant cycle, Cohort 2, will be funded from 2023 through 2026.

Professional learning is delivered and facilitated through the seven regional academies, each of which is responsible for serving leaders in a particular geographical region (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Lead Organizations Administering the 21CSLA Regional Academies for the 2023–2026 Grant Cycle and Counties Served

Regional academy	Lead organization	Counties served
Alameda (known as Bay Area Regional Academy)	University of California, Berkeley	Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano
Kern (known as Valley to Coast Collaborative)	Los Angeles County Office of Education	Fresno, Kern, Los Angeles, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura
Placer-Sacramento	Sacramento County Office of Education	Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Colusa, El Dorado, Nevada, Placer, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Sierra, Sutter, Tuolumne, Yolo, Yuba
San Diego/Riverside (known as SoCal Regional Academy)	Los Angeles Education Partnership	Imperial, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego
Shasta (known as NorCal Educational Leadership Consortium)	Chico State Enterprises	Butte, Del Norte, Glenn, Humboldt, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Shasta, Siskiyou, Tehama, Trinity

Regional academy	Lead organization	Counties served
Sonoma (known as North Bay/North Coast Regional Academy)	Sonoma County Office of Education	Lake, Marin, Mendocino, Napa, Sonoma
Tulare (known as Mid-State Regional Academy)	Madera County Office of Education	Inyo, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, Monterey, San Benito, Santa Cruz, Stanislaus, Tulare

Source: University of California Berkeley. [Find your regional academy.](#)

The statewide program is administered by the 21CSLA State Center, which is housed at the University of California, Berkeley School of Education in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies and the California Subject Matter Project, which is led by the UC Office of the President. The State Center supports regional academies by:

- providing ongoing coaching, mentoring, and training for regional academy staff;
- sharing information, resources, and data throughout the 21CSLA initiative;
- supporting knowledge development and continuous improvement through research activities that prioritize the integration of research and practice;
- consulting with stakeholders on the 21CSLA Advisory Council as part of continuous improvement efforts;
- cooperating with the California Department of Education (CDE), State Board of Education (SBE), and California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) to develop yearly deliverables for the State Center and regional academies; and
- working with the CDE, CCEE, and the external evaluator, RTI International, as needed.

The State Center also regularly convenes regional academy and State Center staff, publishes periodic newsletters and research and practice briefs, and supports a digital support hub it created (The Hub) for professional learning. With extensive input from stakeholders across the state, the State Center has developed guidance for each type of professional learning, which it will continue to refine in the coming years.¹⁷

Professional Learning Activities

21CSLA’s regional academies offer three primary types of professional learning opportunities:

- **Communities of practice** bring together cohorts of leaders in similar district roles to engage collaboratively in ongoing work focused on “equity-centered problems of practice using continuous improvement to strengthen their capacity for transformational leadership.”¹⁸
- **Localized professional learning** refers to professional learning opportunities that are developed by regional academies in response to regional need and local input.
- **Coaching** is an individualized support that pairs leaders with a trained leadership coach for at least 25 hours of virtual and/or site-based coaching.

Regional academies have significant freedom regarding the content of their offerings, although all 21CSLA professional learning is expected to align with the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSEL) and the Quality Professional Learning Standards (QPLS). The State Center also has issued guidance, developed in partnership with stakeholders and regional academy leads, that supports alignment between the professional learning approaches adopted by each regional academy and any partner organization they work with to develop and deliver offerings. In this guidance, the State Center articulates a set of five CPSEL- and QPLS-aligned 21CSLA Guiding Principles that hold across the initiative’s offerings. 21CSLA professional learning:

1. Supports productive critical dialogue across the state to address pervasive leadership challenges that impede student learning, especially for underserved student populations
2. Focuses on leadership for equity, including issues of instruction, at three levels: teacher leaders, site leaders, and district leaders
3. Models and builds capacity in alignment with the California QPLS and a culture of continuous improvement
4. Uses differentiated designs that are job embedded and informed by local needs
5. Develops and models alignment with the priorities of CDE, CCEE, and SBE¹⁹

We discuss 21CSLA’s commitment to leadership for equity and continuous improvement, two organizational emphases indicated in the Guiding Principles, at greater length later in this report (see the sections [Emphasizing Equity to Support All California Students](#) and [Continuous Improvement](#)).

A set of yearly grant deliverables issued by the 21CSLA State Center in 2021 provides additional expectations for regional academies’ delivery of services for each type of offering (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Regional Academy Deliverables for Year 3

Communities of practice (CoP)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support a minimum of 12 CoP groups of leaders in similar roles: at least 3 teacher leader groups, 3 site leader groups, and 3 district leader groups. Each CoP will support a minimum of 15 participants, for a total of at least 180 participants. 2. Support each CoP with at least 12 hours of professional learning sustained over a minimum of four learning events. 3. Recruit and enroll a diverse group of leaders who work in various contexts and who represent the racial diversity of California public school students and/or other diversity factors such as religion, gender, and language fluency. 4. Track recruitment and participation to ensure that leaders across the Geo Region are being equitably reached and served. 5. Ensure that all CoP offerings align with the priority topics of equity, continuous improvement, and distance/digital learning. 6. Participate in continuous improvement efforts, including those designed by the evaluators. Revise and improve offerings based on feedback and evaluation activities.

Localized professional learning

1. Comprehensively assess the localized needs of the region on an ongoing basis.
2. Ensure offerings are aligned to the Quality Professional Learning Standards, 21CSLA Guiding Principles, and the localized professional learning guidance document.
3. Recruit and enroll a diverse group of leaders who hold various roles, work in different contexts, and represent the racial diversity of California public school students and/or other diversity factors such as religious, gender, and language fluency.
4. Provide eight localized learning opportunities that inform site-based problems of practice in equity leadership, serving 30 participants for at least 12 hours of professional learning each, for a minimum of 240 participants total.
5. Communicate key ideas and resources from localized professional learning to the Geo Region.
6. Track recruitment and participation to ensure that leaders across the Geo Region are being equitably reached and served.
7. Participate in continuous improvement efforts, including those designed by the evaluators.

Coaching

1. Support a minimum of 60 leaders who work in contexts that receive Title II funding. At least 75% of leaders served should be from schools/local education agencies (LEAs) eligible for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), designated for Differentiated Assistance (DA), or equivalent. No more than 25% can be from schools/LEAs not eligible for CSI, designated for DA, or equivalent.
2. Recruit and enroll a diverse group of leaders who hold various roles: district and site administrators who hold Clear Administrative Services Credential authorization or equivalent, and teachers (or teachers on special assignment) who provide direct support to classroom teachers and represent the racial diversity of California public school students and/or other diversity factors such as religion, gender, and language fluency.
3. Track coaching participation, as leaders will only be eligible for 1 year of individual coaching, and use this tracking to inform efforts to create equitable access to coaching.
4. Provide 25 hours of individual coaching in alignment with the 21CSLA Leadership Coaching Guidance Document; provide up to an additional 5 hours of support as necessary.
5. Recruit, train, support, and supervise a cadre of leadership coaches who are ready to effectively serve the diverse needs of participants through an equity lens.
6. Provide coaching in person or through a hybrid model. Hybrid models must include a minimum of 5 hours or three in-person visits with the participant.
7. Employ a matching process that incorporates professional experience, regional knowledge, and special requests.
8. Have coaching coordinators (or coaching leads) participate in ongoing professional learning with the State Center to build capacity to train and support coaches through an equity lens.
9. Provide ongoing professional learning for all coaches in alignment with the 21CSLA Guiding Principles and Leadership Coaching Guidance Document for a minimum of 3 hours per month.
10. Participate in continuous improvement efforts, including those designed by the evaluators.

Source: Adapted from 21CSLA. (2021). *Guidance for communities of practice (area 6), localized professional learning (area 7) and leadership coaching (area 8)*.

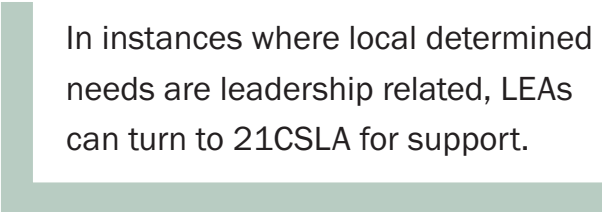
21CSLA's Role in California's Statewide System of Support

21CSLA operates as a lead agency in California's comprehensive Statewide System of Support. The Statewide System of Support, an important part of the state's accountability and continuous improvement strategy, has been designed to build the capacity of LEAs to:

- support the continuous improvement of student performance in the state priority areas evaluated in the California School Dashboard;
- address the gaps in achievement between student groups, specifically racial and ethnic subgroups, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, English learners, students with disabilities, foster youth, and homeless youth; and
- improve outreach and collaboration with stakeholders to ensure that goals, actions, and services described in school district and county office of education (COE) [Local Control and Accountability Plans](#) reflect the needs of students and the community, especially for historically underrepresented or low-achieving groups.²⁰

The System of Support provides multiple tiers of support: generalized supports for all California LEAs and schools, Differentiated Assistance for LEAs that meet specific eligibility requirements set by the State Board of Education, and comprehensive support and improvement for LEAs that experience persistent performance issues and do not show improvement over a 4-year period. The System of Support designates 17 lead agencies, including 21CSLA, that specialize in providing support in specific content areas. For example, the Community Engagement Initiative, another lead agency, helps LEAs and schools implement more successful community engagement strategies, which may be a priority for schools and LEAs looking to improve rates of chronic absenteeism. 21CSLA's role, in contrast, is to provide high-quality professional learning that supports the ongoing development of educational leaders.

By establishing lead agencies for specific content or geographical areas, California aims to increase the visibility and accessibility of the resources, expertise, and services available through the various agencies by creating a clear point of contact for LEAs seeking particular types of support in response to a locally determined need.



In instances where local determined needs are leadership related, LEAs can turn to 21CSLA for support.

In instances where local determined needs are leadership related, LEAs can turn to 21CSLA for support. Lead agencies then connect these help-seekers with resources or other avenues of assistance that address their needs—in the case of 21CSLA, relevant leadership-oriented professional learning. Uniting lead agencies in the Statewide System of Support is intended to reduce redundancy and support the integration of guidance and resources across state and federal programs.²¹

Contributions of 21CSLA

21CSLA is intended to increase leaders' access to high-quality professional development in order to build their leadership knowledge and skills so they can improve their practices, ultimately bolstering student achievement. This report identifies five major contributions of 21CSLA in meeting educational leaders' professional learning needs:

1. Expanding access to high-quality professional learning
2. Emphasizing equity to support all California students
3. Meeting state and local needs to support state initiatives and school improvement efforts
4. Tailoring learning opportunities to enhance leaders' effectiveness
5. Coordinating with agencies in the Statewide System of Support

Expanding Access to High-Quality Professional Learning

In conceptualizing 21CSLA, California recognized the need to increase leaders' access to professional learning. State and other agencies affiliated with 21CSLA also recognized, in accordance with research on principal learning,²² that this professional learning must be of high quality in order to benefit leaders. As implemented, 21CSLA appears to be successful in promoting both access and quality. Furthermore, to bolster regional academies' ability to put high-quality programming into practice, the State Center models promising practices and conducts ongoing research on how leaders learn from 21CSLA professional learning opportunities.

Access to Professional Learning

There is little statewide information on the number of teacher leaders and district leaders who have access to high-quality professional learning. We do know, however, about principals' access to professional development.²³ As of 2017, prior to the reauthorization of 21CSLA, most California principals (between 85% and 99% for each of 23 topics covered in a survey) had at least superficial exposure to important content related to providing instructional leadership, leading and managing school improvement, shaping teaching and learning conditions, developing people, and meeting the needs of all learners. However, most of this content was accessed through participation in workshops or conferences. Many fewer principals reported having had access to authentic, job-embedded learning opportunities that apply learning in practice that prior research has identified as important to their development. For example, fewer than half (43%) of the principals regularly participated in peer observation and coaching during a 2-year time frame, and only 37% reported having had an on-the-job mentor or coach.²⁴

21CSLA appears to be increasing access to professional learning for school and district leaders, including school administrators, teacher leaders, and district administrators. Over the course of the first 3-year grant cycle, and despite disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, 21CSLA served approximately 8,300 unique California leaders with no-cost professional learning opportunities. Regional academies provided a total of 333 communities of practice and localized professional learning offerings and facilitated coaching for hundreds of leaders (384 in Year 3 alone).²⁵ Participation has increased over time as well. In Year 3, more than 3,500 leaders registered for 21CSLA offerings, representing the largest number of leaders annually to date.²⁶

As 21CSLA enters the second grant cycle, 21CSLA leaders described working to ensure that education leaders are equitably served by 21CSLA. Regional academy staff analyzed participation data to understand who was accessing 21CSLA professional learning opportunities within their region and identify participation gaps. For some regional academies, this analysis has revealed that leaders in certain counties, school types (e.g., rural or charter schools), or demographic categories (e.g., leaders of color in some parts of the state) are underrepresented. This insight has prompted regional academies to engage in more targeted recruitment in order to improve access and create greater parity between the groups of leaders served by the initiative. The director of the Valley to Coast Collaborative Regional Academy shared that the analysis of participation data prompted changes in the regional academy's practices: "Most of our participants are female, elementary, primarily not BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color]. And so one of the things that we did this year in 2022–23 was work to really ensure that our participants are diverse, as diverse as our six counties." With the goal of diversifying recruitment, this regional academy began conducting outreach through BIPOC leader-serving professional organizations and created professional learning offerings that specifically targeted individuals from underrepresented groups (e.g., a community of practice specifically for male leaders of color).

Quality of Professional Learning

Importantly, the professional learning that 21CSLA's 8,300 participants have accessed aligns with research on effective professional learning and leader development. Research has documented that high-quality principal learning programs include:

- meaningful and authentic learning opportunities that apply learning in practice;
- content focused on leading instruction, developing people, creating a collaborative learning organization, and managing change;
- mentoring or coaching, along with feedback and opportunities for reflection;
- cohort or networking structures that create a professional learning community;
- proactive recruitment; and
- a focus on equity-oriented leadership.²⁷

As described earlier, 21CSLA offers three primary types of professional learning opportunities: communities of practice, localized professional learning, and coaching. These evidence-based modalities were adopted to implement best practice, job-embedded leadership development as identified in the research literature. Communities of practice allow leaders to participate in collaborative learning. Localized professional learning provides experiences that are problem based and context specific. Coaching enables individualized, tailored support and opportunities for feedback and reflection. According to the *21CSLA Guidance Document* issued by the State Center, the three modalities are understood as "synergistic and complementary" and, taken together, as creating the potential for "powerful opportunities to increase educator effectiveness and advance equity."²⁸ While regional academies have flexibility with regard to the delivery and content within these modalities, implementation is structured based on the *Guidance Document*. Of note is the mandate that all professional learning activities occur over an extended duration, another best practice identified in the research literature.²⁹ Regional academy deliverables state that communities of practice and localized professional learning offerings must involve at least 12 hours of professional learning, and the coaching program must provide a minimum of 25 hours of individual leadership coaching to each participant.

Table 3 shows how the design of 21CSLA reflects the characteristics of high-quality principal learning identified in the research.

Table 3. How 21CSLA Reflects the Characteristics of High-Quality Principal Learning Programs

Research-based characteristics of high-quality principal learning	21CSLA professional learning practices
Meaningful, authentic, and applied learning opportunities	All regional academies are required to conduct a needs assessment and address identified needs through localized learning opportunities that are embedded within the local context and developed in partnership with stakeholders.
Curriculum focused on developing people, instruction, and the organization	Professional development offerings must align with the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders, which cover development and implementation of a shared vision; instructional leadership; management and learning environment; family and community engagement; ethics and integrity; and external context and policies.
Expert mentoring and coaching	Coaching is a required structure for all regional academies.
Program structures that support collegial learning and collaboration	Communities of practice are a required structure for all regional academies.
Proactive recruitment	Each regional academy has developed a recruitment strategy. 21CSLA, in general, prioritizes novice leaders, leaders in high-need settings, and leaders involved in school improvement, and it strives to provide professional learning activities that center equity.
Focus on equity and meeting the needs of diverse learners	21CSLA State Center guidance requires that providing high-quality, equity-centered professional learning is the core mission and purpose of 21CSLA and that 21CSLA professional learning should support the development of equity-focused leaders.
Sufficient time for participant engagement	21CSLA State Center guidance requires that communities of practice and localized professional learning have a minimum duration of 12 hours and that individuals receive a minimum of 25 hours of coaching.

Sources: Darling-Hammond, L., Wechsler, M. E., Levin, S., Leung-Gagné, M., & Tozer, S. (2022). *Developing effective principals: What kind of learning matters?* Learning Policy Institute; RTI International. (2021). *21st Century School Leadership Academy external evaluation brief, 2020–2021*. RTI International; SRM Evaluation and Assessment Group. (2022). *21CSLA Year 1 & 2 formative evaluation report*. University of California, Los Angeles; 21CSLA. (2021). *Guidance for communities of practice (area 6), localized professional learning (area 7) and leadership coaching (area 8)*.

Modeling Promising Practices

To support regional academies in implementing the characteristics of high-quality professional learning, the State Center uses evidence-based professional learning practices in its work with the regional academies. By doing so, they provide a model for the regional academies to re-create in their work with the county offices of education and local education agencies (LEAs) that they support.

To support regional academies in implementing the characteristics of high-quality professional learning, the State Center uses evidence-based professional learning practices in its work with the regional academies.

For example, the State Center models the development and delivery of professional learning activities through ongoing Collaboratives that bring together regional academy leaders and State Center staff—together referred to as the 21CSLA Collective—to address specific content areas and share with and learn from each other. Collective members have the opportunity to participate in Collaboratives on coaching, continuous improvement, and universal transitional kindergarten (UTK). The director for the 21CSLA State Center shared, “Our goal in those [Collaboratives], as the State Center, is to really model what we believe is transformative learning. ... We’re also really trying to model the best of what we think is effective professional learning in those environments.” For example, the meetings focus on real problems of practice, collaborative learning, and individualized feedback.

The State Center also models how to center equity in professional learning. The State Center begins each Collective meeting with a review of the 21CSLA Equity Statement and intentionally allots time to delve deeply into equity leadership and what it means across the regional academies. At Collective retreats, which occur twice per year, the State Center facilitates collective learning about specific equity-related topics. For example, previous retreat topics included discussions of the school-to-prison pipeline, ways to improve support for leaders of color by better understanding how their work is impacted by race, and issues of access and inclusion in digital teaching environments. “We’re really trying to model effective professional learning in those environments,” shared the State Center director. (See [Emphasizing Equity to Support All California Students](#) for more details.)

In addition, the State Center models relationship-building by listening to regional academy leaders, responding to needs, and building trust. The regional academy leaders reported that they re-created this relationship-building in their work with the districts and counties they support. The Valley to Coast Collaborative Regional Academy, for example, was deliberate in developing relationships with counties in the region by seeking their input and empowering them to play a central role in delivering professional learning for the region’s leaders. The regional academy’s project director explains:

I believe that our greatest success is developing a real, genuine partnership with six counties in California. When we first started, it really felt like they were strangers in an advisory group, and quite frankly, they were bothered by 21CSLA ... [because] everything we offer is in competition to what they offer in their county offices for a fee. ... In the course of 3 years, we really maneuvered that situation by contracting with these six counties [to deliver professional learning]. We said, “You tell us what you want to do, and we’ll assign a dollar amount to your

participation.” And the minute that we did that ... they stepped up to the table, saying, “Wow, you trust us?” And it was like, “Yes, we trust you. Let’s trust each other.” And for the very first time, we really feel like we are actually synergizing together for the good of 21CSLA.

Integrating Research and Practice

The State Center is well positioned to bridge the academic research on leadership development with the needs and knowledge of leadership practitioners. The State Center views the integration of research and practice as an “integral part of 21CSLA’s work” and, as an expression of this priority, features a research team that coordinates these efforts.³⁰ As described on the 21CSLA website, “While providing high-level professional learning for educational leaders, it is essential to understand how the leaders are learning with us so that we can continue to center equity, improve our work, and contribute to a larger knowledge base.”³¹ 21CSLA uses a research practice partnership model through which researchers and practitioners collaborate to produce relevant, actionable research to address real problems of practice. The research team works to integrate research and practice by (a) conducting and disseminating original research on the 21CSLA initiative and (b) bringing together researchers and practitioners to discuss timely issues in leadership development.

The State Center’s research team conducts ongoing research on how TK–12 leaders learn to lead for equity through 21CSLA professional learning. Their research has three focus areas:

1. The professional context of educational leadership, specifically the “unique resources and limitations” experienced by leaders in their daily work and the contextual features that sustain change-oriented leadership
2. How 21CSLA professional learning develops leaders’ capacity to lead for equity
3. How 21CSLA professional learning contributes to the adoption of practices and policies that enable more equitable TK–12 schooling environments

The insights gleaned from these research strands feed back into 21CSLA’s continuous improvement processes (see [Continuous Improvement](#)). In addition, the State Center publishes research findings as research-practice briefs, which are designed to inform the work of regional academies and leadership practitioners throughout the state and contribute to the knowledge base of the broader field of educational leadership development. As 21CSLA goes forward, the State Center intends to continue expanding research activities, such as by building regional academies’ capacity to study their own work and increasing research collaborations with California’s scholarly community.

In addition to conducting original research, the State Center hosts webinars that bring together academic researchers and school- and district-based practitioners to discuss timely issues in educational leadership. Regional academy staff attend these events, which also are live and open to the public. In general, they include researcher panelists (typically professors from local universities, who share relevant research findings that can inform practice) and practitioner panelists (typically principals and/or superintendents, who provide their perspectives on how the issues play out in schools). By hosting these webinars, the State Center aims to provide information and resources that can inform regional academies’ professional learning offerings. After each webinar, the research team archives the recording

on the 21CSLA webpage and publishes a brief that summarizes the webinar highlights, resulting in a library of resources that can be used by regional academies and by leaders and other stakeholders across the state.

Emphasizing Equity to Support All California Students

A commitment to cultivating leadership for equity sits at the center of 21CSLA's work. This understanding of equity leadership, shared among the State Center and the regional academies, is articulated in the 21CSLA Equity Statement:

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.³²

According to the *21CSLA Guidance Document*, this statement “serves as an important guidepost at the highest level for [21CSLA's] collective work.”³³ Regional academies operationalize this commitment by working to identify the specific challenges to access, opportunity, and inclusion that exist in the regions they serve and to develop professional learning that helps leaders address these challenges. The UCLA-based internal formative evaluator of the 21CSLA initiative noted:

In every region, there are groups that have been historically marginalized and underserved. That may mean, in some regions, emergent bilinguals. That may mean, in other regions, students of color, and in other regions, low-income rural populations. There's room on the 21CSLA logic model for regional academies and leaders to think about the groups they need to serve and what that might look like.

In line with the 21CSLA Guiding Principles, regional academies determine and design professional learning opportunities with the goal of cultivating leadership for equity. “We shape almost everything we do ... with equity in mind,” remarked one of the co-directors of the Bay Area Regional Academy. Another regional academy leader described a system for prioritizing professional learning requests based on their potential impact for marginalized student groups. For example, a request for general coaching on instructional leadership would rank lower in priority than a request for coaching on instructional leadership with a specific focus on English learners. As a result of this prioritization process, equity-relevant topics are readily observable in the content of regional academy offerings.³⁴

Both the localized professional learning and communities of practice aim to support leaders in working toward more equitable practices in their schools and districts. In some cases, professional learning content focuses on helping leaders use data to identify equity-related disparities that exist within their district or school site and/or facilitates leaders' reflection on their own positionality, biases, and beliefs in relation to the identified issues. Other offerings provide guidance on how leaders can address inequities that emerge in relation to specific racial, linguistic, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship, and disability-related identities of students and staff. In some cases, the professional learning aims to broaden leaders' understanding of the full scope of equity-related issues that schools and districts can address (e.g., by helping them expand their equity lens from specifically racial issues to a broader set of salient and intersectional social identity categories).

Another way that 21CSLA addresses equity is by providing support tailored to the needs of leaders of color and leaders with historically marginalized gender and sexual identities. Through affinity group-style communities of practices that serve identity-based groups (e.g., African American male leaders; Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander leaders; LGBTQ+ leaders), regional academies create spaces where leaders can connect with similarly situated peers around the joys and challenges of leadership.

The 21CSLA coaching program embodies a similar equity focus. Regional academies train coaches to provide equity-centered school leadership coaching that attends to racial and other identity dynamics in the coach-coachee relationship and supports coachees in developing “more just school routines that center opportunity and inclusion of minoritized students through critical reflection and action” at their school or district sites.³⁵ At some regional academies, coaches have opportunities to engage in ongoing professional learning to develop their equity-centered coaching practice. For example, the Mid-State Regional Academy has coaches participate in a monthly community of practice focused on deepening their understanding of equity-centered coaching and creating space for coaches to work through problems of practice in their coach-coachee relationships.

Despite the embedded equity focus across offerings, regional academies nonetheless experience challenges in their pursuit of equity. Regional academy leaders report that school leaders, LEAs, and county offices of education are in different places when it comes to their openness to equity-focused leadership development and described experiencing pushback from a subset of regions. The director of the 21CSLA State Center UTK Leadership Initiative shared that when this pushback happens, 21CSLA leaders adjust their approach and look for new “entry points” to serve these leadership populations while still “staying true” to 21CSLA’s emphasis on cultivating leadership for equity.

Regional academies also face challenges in recruiting a diverse corps of coaches to match the diversity of leaders served by the coaching program. The coaching coordinator for the Valley to Coast Collaborative Regional Academy described “regularly looking to improve the diversity of our coaching cadre” so that leaders who registered for coaching could have the opportunity to select a coach with shared identity characteristics or professional experiences, if they so desire. For the SoCal Regional Academy’s coaching coordinator, the challenge of recruiting diverse coaches was interlinked with other leadership challenges that 21CSLA worked to address—namely leadership retention. “We know how many [educational leaders] leave every year, particularly our leaders of color. ... It’s going to be hard for us to continue to find coaches and to keep people in the field unless we really start to consider their holistic well-being.”

Despite these challenges, 21CSLA’s emphasis on leadership for equity establishes a particular brand and identity that set 21CSLA apart from other professional learning providers in the state. “We don’t just do everything. We have a niche, and our identity and our brand [are] about equity at the forefront. ... We feel like people who are coming to us are looking for that kind of particular support,” shared the State Center’s associate director. The project director of the Valley to Coast Collaborative Regional Academy mirrored this conviction: “I really believe that 21CSLA is becoming the go-to place for equity.”

Meeting State and Local Needs to Support State Initiatives and School Improvement Efforts

In addition to focusing on equity, 21CSLA professional learning is designed to be responsive to leaders' professional learning needs to address state and local priorities.

Supporting State Initiatives

At the state level, when new state policies or initiatives are enacted, educational leaders often require support for interpreting and implementing these priorities. 21CSLA is well positioned to provide consistent support across the state.

So far, the strongest and most prominent example of 21CSLA supporting a large state initiative has been in developing leaders' abilities to implement UTK. California recently made significant investments in universal prekindergarten by making transitional kindergarten available for all 4-year-olds by 2025–26. Yet research suggests that many school and district leaders lack foundational knowledge of the early years because principal preparation and professional development programs tend to give early childhood education little attention.³⁶ Successful leadership in transitional kindergarten will require educational leaders to have foundational knowledge of early child development and its implications for instructional practices.

To prepare leaders to oversee the education of young children in transitional kindergarten, the California Department of Education awarded \$7 million in grants to the 21CSLA State Center. The State Center used the grants to develop two separate projects under the umbrella of the 21CSLA UTK Leadership Initiative. One project is a UTK Leadership Certificate designed for candidates in a California Commission on Teacher Credentialing–approved Preliminary or Clear Administrative Services Credential program or who hold a Certificate of Eligibility. The Certificate is a no-cost online and synchronous program offered by UC Berkeley Extension that consists of two courses: (1) Leaders Designing Equitable Transitional Kindergarten Classrooms in Action and (2) Equity Centered Leadership Practices to Support, Integrate, and Align Transitional Kindergarten.

The second project, the UTK Professional Learning Modules, supports in-service site leaders, teacher leaders, and central office leaders through a series of eight professional learning modules that address “developmentally appropriate instruction, socio-emotional development, inclusive practices for English language learners and bilingual students, recruiting and retaining highly trained and qualified teachers who reflect the community, home/family engagement, and integration across preschool through third grade” and other topics.³⁷ Beginning in fall 2023, trainers began delivering these modules to local groups of leaders at each of the regional academies, at no cost to participants.

In addition to this formal support for UTK, regional academies respond to leaders' requests for support in implementing other state policies or priorities. As part of their needs assessment processes, regional academy staff solicit leaders' input on professional learning topics and delivery formats that would support their work. In multiple regions, leaders have expressed a need for additional support for two state priorities—community schools and ethnic studies implementation. In response, regional academies

have organized communities of practice where leaders can share practices and learn from each other. They also have created localized professional learning offerings that address content and skills related to these topics.

Supporting Local Initiatives

Although leaders across the state commonly require support for addressing state priorities, leadership needs are, in many cases, more localized. While all 21CSLA professional learning opportunities align with the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders and the Quality Professional Learning Standards, the initiative does not have a set curriculum for leadership development, which allows the opportunities offered by each regional academy to vary significantly. Through this flexibility, the initiative aims to accommodate, as the director of the North Bay/North Coast Regional Academy put it, the “needs that exist on the ground.” Regional academies design professional learning that responds to expressed local need and empowers local leaders with the skills and knowledge to address the problems of practice they face in their work. To maximize the responsiveness of professional learning, one regional academy intentionally avoids booking the full suite of professional learning events in advance for the year. This strategy affords the regional academy the flexibility to add programming to address leadership problems of practice that come up during coaching and communities of practice.

In the grant deliverables, the State Center establishes the requirement that each regional academy “comprehensively assess the localized needs of the region on an ongoing basis” to inform their professional learning offerings. Practices vary between academies, but the needs assessment process typically involves a formal survey or focus groups of leaders in the region. Some regional academies also engage in individualized conversations with practitioners at the COE, LEA, and school-site levels. “We’re constantly listening and soliciting information as to what needs are occurring from district to district, in county to county,” shared the coaching coordinator at the SoCal Regional Academy.

Many regional academy staff identified relationships with other COEs and LEAs in their geographic region as key to understanding and serving the needs of their leaders. For the co-directors at the Bay Area Regional Academy, part of their needs assessment process involved extensive listening campaigns and visitations to district and county offices in order to understand prioritized local initiatives. While seeking to engage a county that “had not found a really relevant way to participate,” staff from the North Bay/North Coast Regional Academy visited county leaders to discuss the problems they were facing in their local context. A conversation about regional data revealed that Native American and Latino/a students were experiencing disparately negative outcomes on standardized tests. The regional academy recommended that the county should further explore this problem of practice by seeking to identify the experiences these students were having in school that might contribute to these outcomes. Once identified, they could work to resolve them. The regional academy staff helped connect the county office with a professional learning partner who had the necessary experience to support to the county in this process. The partner performed a comprehensive assessment of challenges and, in collaboration with members of the community (including representatives from local tribes), ultimately co-designed a program that could address the identified issues.

In several cases, regional academies supplement their needs assessment with data from the California School Dashboard. The dashboard, part of California’s accountability and improvement system, reports school, LEA, and COE performance on math and English language arts academic performance, English

learner progress, college and career readiness, chronic absenteeism, graduation rates, and suspension rates. When LEAs fail to meet focus area performance indicators for 2 years or more, they become eligible for Differentiated Assistance through the Statewide System of Support. The Valley to Coast Collaborative Regional Academy's director described their process:

We take the data from the six counties and look at the reason they became eligible for Differentiated Assistance. ... And then we use that data to then create offerings. The top area is chronic absenteeism. So immediately we hired a facilitator and designed a series based on equity as it relates to chronic absenteeism. What is causing students to not want to come to school? And what strategies can leaders enact to ensure that students are actually physically in school?

Notably, participation in the professional learning developed in response to these data is voluntary, allowing leaders to opt in and exercise control over their learning. While regional academies' processes for identifying and addressing local needs varied, all considered a deep understanding of local need as a necessary prerequisite for the design and provision of relevant professional learning.

Tailoring Learning Opportunities to Enhance Leaders' Effectiveness

All regional academies offer coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning; however, within each of these larger strategies, regional academies adopt unique approaches based on their regional context. Collaboratively, State Center and regional academy staff developed an apt metaphor, likening their work to jazz to illustrate how room is intentionally left for interpretation and improvisation. As stated in the State Center-issued *Guidance Document*:

As described by the great American jazz legend Wynton Marsalis, each instrument in a jazz ensemble has a distinct sound and beat. While all of the musicians have the same score, the music always leaves room for interpretation and improvisation. Each time the piece is performed, there may be slight variations while still maintaining the recognizable structure and melodies of the composer. This *Guidance Document* is intended to be the jazz score that is written for 21CSLA.³⁸

The jazz-like interpretation and improvisation can be observed in the different approaches taken by the Mid-State Regional Academy and NorCal Educational Leadership Consortium. In an effort to ensure that leaders across the region can access content and develop skills that are relevant to their geographic contexts, the Mid-State Regional Academy, operating under the Madera County Superintendent of Schools, enlists other COEs in the design and delivery of professional learning. An advisory committee made up of representatives from the 11 counties within the Mid-State geographic region identified disparate learning needs across counties. For example, in one county, leaders sought support to implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; in another county, leaders were seeking support for developing instructional leadership in early literacy. In response, the Mid-State Regional Academy designed a system in which the county offices could, with the regional academy's financial and administrative support, facilitate relevant professional learning within their own counties. They refer to this system as the Equity Support Incubator Program, or Equity Incubator for short. Through this program, COEs can submit an application proposing a community of practice or localized professional learning opportunity that addresses an equity-related need observed within their county. The regional academy

evaluates proposals and, for those they approve, provides up to \$20,000 in funding, co-brands the event with the COE, and collects participation data and feedback. By creating a channel for counties to address their own local needs, the regional academy both ensures the relevance of professional learning and increases the number of events that the regional academy can make available to leaders within the region.

Taking a different approach, the NorCal Educational Leadership Consortium focuses on professional learning for leadership teams. This approach, called the Team Level, has been adopted to meet the unique needs of leaders in the predominantly rural region served by the regional academy. The regional academy's professional learning director explained:

We've taken this team-based approach to developing leaders because we find in a lot of the rural schools you have school leaders ... who wear a lot of hats, and they just can't do it on their own. [In the Team Level], we develop a team and build the leadership within that team to take on a transformational change that is locally centered.

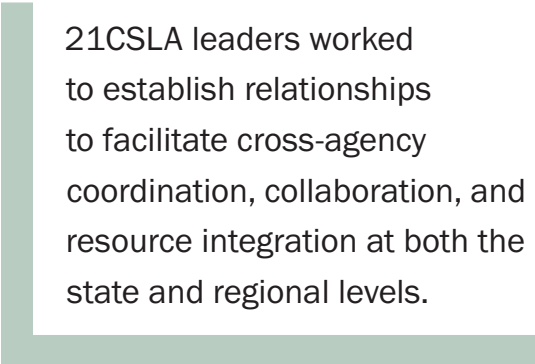
The Team Level is a yearlong professional learning program designed to serve teams of educational leaders from a single school, district, or county who are committed to working together to address a local problem or concern related to equity (e.g., addressing the learning needs of English learners, bolstering relationships with families and communities). Each team is required to include at least one site administrator and one teacher, and the regional academy recommends, but does not require, including a member from the district or county office of education. Admission to the program is by application, with priority given to teams from districts that serve Title I students or that are eligible for Differentiated Assistance or Comprehensive Support and Improvement. Each admitted team commits to attending a series of professional learning activities that include frequent meetings, webinars and online learning modules, and 2-day institutes in the winter and summer. In total, the program involves between 32 and 46 hours of engagement over a single school year.

Over the course of the year, teams refine their understanding of their focal problem by analyzing relevant data and engage in continuous improvement practices with the goal of improving outcomes for the students they serve. The content of professional learning activities that teams attend is designed to be responsive to teams' problems of practice. Each team identifies a team lead, and this person participates in monthly one-on-one coaching, with additional coaching available as needed. Coaching aims to provide support around building the leadership capacity of the leader's entire team, but it also helps team leads address emergent challenges related to the team's problem of practice. Although teams focus on a single problem of practice in the program, regional academy leaders aim to develop capacity and skills that can be transferred to other areas in need of improvement within teams' leadership settings. By Year 3 of the first grant cycle, Team Level was serving more than 40 teams across the region. "We're very unique from other regions," acknowledged the regional academy's professional learning director, "but we think we've been very successful." Other regional academies have noted a desire among leaders for professional learning that develops leadership teams and intend to develop programming that similarly adopts a more collective approach to leadership.

Coordinating With Agencies in the Statewide System of Support

As a lead agency in the Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is one of several initiatives that offer expertise, programs, and resources to local districts and COEs. The System of Support design intends for lead agencies to coordinate, collaborate, and integrate their resources and strategies to build local capacity to improve educational outcomes for California’s students. Other lead agencies overlap with 21CSLA in their subject area focus and/or geographical purview. For example, Regional COE English Learner Specialists provide assistance to LEAs working to improve outcomes for students who are English learners. Given the role of educational leaders in implementing policies and practices that support this student group, several 21CSLA regional academies provide professional learning that focuses on helping leaders improve English learner services and student outcomes at their school or district sites. Like 21CSLA, Regional COE English Learner Specialists provide services regionally, with one COE designated to provide services in each of the state’s 11 County Superintendent regions. Although these regions do not map exactly onto the 7 geographic regions served by 21CSLA’s regional academies, geographic service-area overlaps create natural opportunities for expertise sharing and collaboration on the development and delivery of professional learning that addresses region-specific challenges. While these opportunities exist, the interagency relationships necessary for collaboration are still being developed.

In the first grant cycle, 21CSLA leaders worked to establish relationships to facilitate cross-agency coordination, collaboration, and resource integration at both the state and regional levels. At the state level, State Center leadership attends the Statewide System of Support meetings. The State Center has also established the expectation that regional academies will participate in System of Support activities by including a grant deliverable that requires them to do so as part of their process for ongoing stakeholder input and engagement.³⁹



21CSLA leaders worked to establish relationships to facilitate cross-agency coordination, collaboration, and resource integration at both the state and regional levels.

At the regional level, regional academy leaders have developed relationships and initiated collaborations with the Geographic Lead Agencies (called Geo Leads) in their region. Geo Leads, like 21CSLA regional academies, exist in each of the state’s seven Geo Regions. These agencies coordinate Differentiated Assistance for their Geo Region, work to build the capacity of local county offices to provide Differentiated Assistance, and, in cases where county offices are unable to do so themselves, provide assistance directly to districts. The director of the Valley to Coast Collaborative Regional Academy views collaboration with her region’s Geo Lead as highly beneficial. She reports that engagement with the region’s Geo Lead has deepened the regional academy’s understanding of LEAs’ needs and helped identify instances in which these needs are leadership related. In these instances, 21CSLA can step forth and provide support. “If an LEA wrote into their [Local Control and Accountability Plan] that the way they’re going to improve is to have their site administrators undergo leadership coaching, then 21CSLA is the perfect fit for that,” she shared. Regional academies also take into account Geo Leads’ regional priority areas when developing programming. At Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy, where the degree of coordination with the Geo Lead is particularly high, regional academy staff even participate in determining regional priority areas (see [Collaboration in the Placer-Sacramento Geo Region](#) for more details).

Although regional academies have established connections with their Geo Leads, most expressed a desire for deeper partnership and collaboration. One regional academy leader shared that, although they attended quarterly meetings hosted by their region’s Geo Lead, the collaboration is not as substantive as they would like: “What it looks like for us right now is we present, we ask for input, we get that input, and then we’re excused from the meeting.” In their ideal scenario, they would be “part of that meeting and part of the collaboration around the System of Support, versus [being viewed as] this one-off outside of it.” Another regional academy leader expressed frustration at a perceived “lack of trust” from the Geo Lead in her region. “Right now it feels like there’s more competition rather than [emphasis on] how we can work together,” she shared.

Multiple regional academy leads expressed the conviction that heightened collaboration would benefit the leaders and LEAs that the System of Support aims to serve. One regional academy director expressed concern that if each agency operates its own siloed projects, leaders will be overwhelmed by the barrage of potentially redundant support options available to them. She noted that, together, these agencies have sufficient funding and capacity to potentially “reach every leader in every corner of our regions.” From her perspective, collaboration—rather than competition—will be necessary to achieve this potential. Similarly, the director for the 21CSLA State Center UTK Leadership Initiative views increased connection and collaboration between agencies as a route to more complementary practices in support of leaders.

The director of Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy also noted that 21CSLA can play a key role in connecting leaders to resources provided by other agencies in the System of Support, especially given the organization’s growing network of leaders across the state. “Site leaders and teacher leaders, even district offices, don’t understand the System of Support. [These leaders] don’t know what’s out there and what’s available. But 21CSLA is a way to bring it to the ground level for them,” he shared.

Collaboration in the Placer-Sacramento Geo Region

Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy staff work regularly with the region's Geographic Lead Agency (Geo Lead). The staff contribute to the agency's strategic planning and provide input in the determination of the region's priority areas. The director of Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy shared that he incorporates these priority areas into the regional academy's programming and uses them to inform "what our topics will be for our communities of practice, our main content we're going to deliver in terms of our localized professional learning, and even where we need to prioritize support for our coaches." In addition, the regional academy consults with the Geo Lead to understand which local education agencies the regional academy should target with elevated levels of support. This level of coordination between Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy and the region's Geo Lead is facilitated by the collocation of both agencies in the same county office building and each agency's willingness to engage in regular planned collaboration meetings.

Like other regional academy leaders, the Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy director looks for opportunities to continually increase the complementarity of practices between 21CSLA and other Statewide System of Support agencies. In the ideal situation, he said, other agencies would provide important technical assistance around new initiatives—such as multi-tiered systems of support or universal transitional kindergarten—and 21CSLA would support leaders as they work through the process of implementing and integrating these initiatives into existing systems. For instance, localized professional learning could address problems of practice encountered during implementation in leaders' unique contexts, and communities of practice could provide leaders space to learn and share knowledge with similarly positioned colleagues. The director has already begun to implement this vision at his regional academy. He explained:

I worked with some of the differentiated teams through the System of Support to develop a community of practice around how leaders actually connected their Single Plan for Student Achievement, the SPSA, to their vision. [We asked,] "How do you lead for this and make sure you're intentional about it?"

The director admitted that even in his region, collaboration between agencies is far from a "perfect science," but he noted, "We're trying to get better at it. We try to get as much input as possible."

Early Evidence of Impact

21CSLA strives to support leaders in creating transformative change within their leadership contexts. The goal is for leaders to engage with 21CSLA learning opportunities and build knowledge and skills that can be put to work in creating more equitable systems within their school or district. While the 21CSLA State Center and regional academy leaders and evaluators continue to collect and analyze data for evaluating the impact of 21CSLA professional learning on leaders, the teachers they support, and the students they serve, the initiative is meeting its near-term goals.

Formal Evaluations Document Impact

Both the internal and external evaluations commissioned by 21CSLA leaders provide evidence that participants value the opportunity to engage in 21CSLA professional learning and that doing so impacts their leadership practices. In the UCLA Social Research Methodology (SRM) internal evaluation, a large majority of participants indicated that they enjoyed the sessions in which they had participated (91%), thought the sessions were an effective use of their time (89%), and thought the sessions addressed equity issues that were relevant to their school or district (91%).⁴⁰

As reported in the 2021–2022 RTI external evaluation brief, many participants reported “changing their practices to better support their colleagues with addressing inequities at their school” as a result of participation in coaching or other offerings. Approximately one third of respondents had started or planned to start utilizing continuous improvement methods such as root cause analysis and cycles of inquiry, or they had adjusted existing continuous improvement practices in their school or district.⁴¹ RTI’s final external evaluation report for Cohort 1 corroborated and expanded on the initial findings. Researchers found that, as a result of engaging in regional academy offerings:

- Participants developed knowledge and skills about evidence-based practices, continuous improvement, and equity. Leaders reported mindset changes about colleagues and students, views of themselves, and perspectives on continuous improvement.
- Participants implemented or improved their practices in equity-focused leadership and continuous improvement in their districts and schools. Leaders reported discussing race and identity, creating a shared purpose or vision, listening and reflecting, changing scheduling practices, using evidence-based instructional practices, leading teams, and leading other leaders.
- Participants anticipated changes in their school, teachers, and students as a result of 21CSLA. Leaders cited school climate improvements, increased teacher collaboration, a reduction in exclusionary discipline, and increases in student engagement and access to evidence-based instruction.⁴²

The evaluators also documented changes in perceived impact over time. Survey respondents were more likely to report seeing impacts on schools, teachers, and students based on their 21CSLA participation in Year 3 of the initiative than they did in previous years.⁴³

Regional Academy Leaders Perceive Changes in Leadership Practice

In the interviews for this study, regional academy leaders described witnessing shifts in leadership practice, particularly in regard to providing equitable educational experiences for all students. The director of the North Bay/North Coast Regional Academy spotlighted an example in which leaders' engagement with 21CSLA triggered policy changes that directly impact students: After attending an anti-racist leadership institute hosted by the regional academy, one superintendent eradicated out-of-school suspensions.

21CSLA's equity focus is impacting not only school and district leaders but also practices at the county office level. The director of the Mid-State Regional Academy anticipates a lasting impact of 21CSLA's equity focus. As described earlier, Mid-State Regional Academy operates an Equity Support Incubator Program (Equity Incubator) through which county offices of education in the region can apply for funds to host equity-oriented professional learning (see [Tailoring Learning Opportunities to Enhance Leaders' Effectiveness](#)). For example, through the Equity Incubator program, one county office facilitated a five-part professional learning opportunity that focused on developing leaders' understanding of asset-based and culturally responsive approaches for educating "at-promise" (as opposed to "at-risk") youth, whereas another provided professional development on implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in ways that are culturally responsive and supportive of equitable student outcomes. The director shared the importance of county offices' involvement:

We're getting each county office to really start working in the field of equitable leadership, especially some that weren't going there at all. So I think we're impacting the county level of work, which is getting down to the leaders in their county. And I think that's important, because once the funding [for 21CSLA] runs out, once this work starts, they can't stop this work. They'll find another way to fund it. Because once you start seeing inequities, you can't stop seeing them.

Although early bright spots are encouraging, 21CSLA leaders recognize that their work will take time to go both deep and wide. As one co-director of the Bay Area Regional Academy put it, "alterations in systems" take time to build. Nonetheless, she added, "moving [these systems] toward justice is what we are all here for."

Participants Value Opportunities to Engage With 21CSLA

Interviewees also described participants' continued engagement as a sign of the quality of offerings and a factor that will lead to greater leadership shifts over time. Regional academy leaders shared that many participants repeatedly attend 21CSLA offerings and participate in multiple types of offerings, such as engaging with both coaching and a community of practice. The State Center's associate director noted that garnering this sort of "repeat audience" is part of 21CSLA's goal as a comprehensive program: "One-shot, one-attendance experiences are not what change leaders' practices in the field. ... A challenge is to keep people engaged and involved so that [21CSLA professional learning] really does change the way that they think and act and exist in the field on a daily basis."

Regional academy leaders shared that part of what sustains participants' engagement in 21CSLA professional learning is the fact that 21CSLA creates opportunities for participants to come together with other leaders in their region. Repeated engagement with a cohort of peers has the potential to ameliorate the feelings of isolation commonly experienced by leaders, allows for collaborative learning and sharing of practices, and can help leaders be more responsive to the needs of teachers, staff, students, and their schools.⁴⁴ "These are people who would never be in the same room otherwise," noted a co-director of the Bay Area Regional Academy, but who benefit from sharing space with colleagues in similar roles. As the co-director described:

Part of what sustains participants' engagement in 21CSLA professional learning is the fact that 21CSLA creates opportunities for participants to come together with other leaders in their region.

You'll often hear comments toward the end of a learning opportunity: "I really hadn't thought of that before, but the way that you guys do it at your school is so different. I'm going to try this." ... For the first time, they're seeing actual examples of how [things are] being done differently elsewhere.

According to the RTI evaluation, collaborating with others facing similar challenges helped participants build knowledge and skills, deepening the benefit of their engagement with 21CSLA content.⁴⁵

The benefit of coming together with colleagues is amplified by the fact that it occurs in a neutral, nondistrict space. Speaking of coaching specifically, the director of the SoCal Regional Academy noted that participants appreciated opportunities for thought partnership with "someone who is outside of [their] district ... [who they] can really think through challenges with in an authentic, safe way." Similarly the research director at the State Center recounted a conversation she had with a principal who had participated in a 21CSLA offering focused on reopening schools in the wake of COVID-19. This principal appreciated being able to come together with colleagues in the 21CSLA professional learning space because she felt that she and her colleagues were given "the power to decide what they want to learn and [to make] sense of their own issues" in a way that could go beyond official district priorities.

Interviewees noted that as its reputation grows, 21CSLA is becoming a go-to organization for individuals and organizations with leadership needs. "We always dreamed that we'd have a district say, 'Hey, we really want to focus on developing our leaders to lead for equity. Can you help us?' That's finally started to happen," shared the director of Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy. However, as State Center and regional academy leaders readily acknowledge, there is room to develop a more robust understanding of the effects of 21CSLA professional learning on leaders' knowledge, skills, and practice. Impact assessment is something they all plan to prioritize in the second grant cycle.

Practices That Support Strong Implementation

As a new program operating at the state and regional levels providing individual and collective professional learning opportunities, implementing 21CSLA was a complicated endeavor. However, this report identifies two practices adopted early on that have supported implementation and continue to contribute to the overall strength of the initiative: (1) the application of a continuous improvement model and (2) the deliberate building of relationships across the many organizations involved in 21CSLA.

Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is a process in which those leading an initiative or project are constantly considering what is working and what should change, with the goal being to reduce “the gap between actual practice and the most effective practice.”⁴⁶ The process includes collecting data on an ongoing basis, performing data analysis, working toward a goal, and testing evidence-based practices.⁴⁷ 21CSLA leaders at the state and regional levels have embraced this idea.

A hallmark of the 21CSLA initiative is that it has been developed, and operates, as an organization that is responsive to the evolving needs of educational leaders as well as those providing support. This responsiveness requires ongoing efforts to collect information, analyze, understand, and address needs over time. As described in the *21CSLA 2021 Guidance for Communities of Practice*:

Using a continuous improvement approach in 21CSLA occurs in nested layers. First, regional academies work in partnership with local school leaders, leveraging a variety of relevant data to assess and prioritize local needs as a part of their work. With the evidence, regional academies develop a customized professional learning program that directly addresses the shared problems of practice and is also designed to build the internal capacity of educational leaders. As the program is implemented, 21CSLA teams work with local leaders to: (1) support its implementation, (2) assess its effectiveness, (3) refine and revise as needed, and (4) use what the collective has learned through this process to inform its ongoing support and capacity building efforts for educational leaders.⁴⁸

A State Center leader described continuous improvement as “an iterative process” that is “definitely collaborative in nature ... we don’t just say, ‘We’re putting this in place’ and then we just do it forever and that’s how it’s going to be. We’ve made a lot of changes along the way.”

Both the 21CSLA State Center and all regional academies engage in data collection to inform continuous improvement. As previously described, the State Center worked with the Social Research Methodology (SRM) Evaluation and Assessment Group at UCLA as an internal formative evaluator during Cohort 1, with the goal of producing actionable feedback based on surveys and focus groups. SRM also facilitated a continuous improvement community of practice for regional academy leaders and worked with the 21CSLA State Center to develop a theory of change to inform implementation and evaluation. For Cohort 2, the State Center will employ a lesson study model for improvement, a Japanese model of educator-led research in which participant-researchers identify an area for development and then track and refine interventions after conducting research, planning, implementing, and observing.⁴⁹ In addition to these formative evaluation efforts, the State Center conducts midyear check-ins with each regional

academy, seeking input and making changes based on that input. The State Center also facilitates Collaboratives in which regional academy leaders meet regularly to share their progress and provide each other with support and guidance.

The State Center’s continuous improvement efforts have been appreciated by regional academy leaders. As the NorCal Educational Leadership Consortium leader shared:

What else impresses me is that they are a learning organization. ... They take feedback, which is so amazing. They ask for feedback all the time so that they can refine their own work. And we see it. We see those refinements and we see that they hear from the different regions and honor the way in which the different regions want to run their programs under the larger umbrella of the goals. I just so appreciate that they model and provide learning. It’s pretty fabulous.

Similar to the State Center, the regional academies use multiple strategies—including focus groups, surveys, and observations—to collect data to inform their practice and future offerings. As a leader at the SoCal Regional Academy described it, “It’s always at the end of the program when they’re saying, ‘This was great, we love this, and this is what we need next.’ That really informs the next year’s program quite a bit.” The Bay Area Regional Academy uses a different approach: Regional academy team members sit in on sessions and record data to understand what the leaders taking part in the offering are experiencing. The regional academy leader noted, “We learned from those observations about the work we’re engaged in and how better to support leaders.” In a different model, NorCal Educational Leadership Consortium staff get feedback twice a month from the 21CSLA coaches about the supports needed by the leaders with whom they work.

Both State Center and regional academy leadership described how their programming has evolved to better serve their constituents as a result of continuous improvement efforts. State Center leaders shared that they had adjusted support and revised materials, including the *Guidance Document*, in response to input solicited through continuous improvement efforts. Across the regional academies, data collection and analysis led to refined content, delivery, and timing of professional learning activities. Continuous improvement efforts have also influenced recruitment practices; support for coaches; and communication with potential participants, county offices of education, and local education agencies (LEAs). Furthermore, the continuous improvement process has led to a focus in two areas across all regional academies: (1) providing supports for teams of leaders, in addition to individual leaders, and (2) working on data collection efforts to determine how programming is influencing participants.

A NorCal Educational Leadership Consortium leader described the value of the academy’s continuous improvement approach:

These feedback loops have been awesome. What they’ve done is not only bring our region together closer, because they see that that feedback is being used and is being used to inform our practices. It’s also helped us really understand and have a really good sense of where our educators in our region are at because they’ll say, “This is where we need to grow. This is what we’re struggling with. This is what’s going well.” I think we have a really, really good sense that we’re on the right track because we’re not trying to decide all this stuff for ourselves. We have multiple layers of feedback that tells us where we’re doing well and where we need to grow. To me, that’s been an incredible success for us.

Relationships and Collaboration

Another practice that supports strong implementation is the emphasis on collaborative relationships between the State Center and state agencies, between the State Center and regional academies, and between the regional academies, county offices of education (COEs), and LEAs.

Collaboration Between the State Center and State Agencies

There are a number of ways in which 21CSLA Center collaborates with state agencies to both share the progress of the initiative and ensure the continued alignment of 21CSLA activities with the state's goals for building the capacity of leaders. The director of the State Center attends monthly meetings with representatives from California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), the State Board of Education (SBE), and the California Department of Education (CDE) at which she provides updates and solicits input on 21CSLA activities. Additional points of contact exist due to 21CSLA's presence at state conferences and engagement with other projects and meetings, including Statewide System of Support meetings, convened by CCEE, and other working groups focused on UTK implementation organized by CDE. The 21CSLA Showcase, hosted in May 2023, provided a further opportunity for CDE, SBE, and CCEE to learn about the work being done by the State Center and regional academies. At the Showcase, regional academy and State Center leaders held roundtable discussions to share impacts of the initiative over its first 3 years. As 21CSLA enters Cohort 2, the State Center aims to deepen and further formalize collaboration with state agencies by including representatives of these organizations in the 21CSLA Advisory Council.

Strong relationships between 21CSLA and state agencies help maintain, as the State Center director put it, the “elegant balance between local control and state priorities” that characterizes the initiative. However, these relationships can also be leveraged to expand the reach of 21CSLA professional learning. For example, state agencies' promotion of 21CSLA's work and professional learning opportunities has helped expand leaders' awareness and utilization of 21CSLA as a leadership resource. The 21CSLA Center, according to the State Center director, regularly contributes to CCEE and CDE listservs. The director of the 21CSLA State Center UTK Leadership Initiative noted that CDE's bimonthly P–3 Alignment Newsletter, which highlights 21CSLA UTK-related professional learning opportunities, has driven “a lot of connection” and “a heightened awareness of what 21CSLA is doing and how it is designed to support leaders.” With this in mind, state agencies could utilize their communication networks with even greater intentionality to broaden 21CSLA's organizational reach and increase the number of leaders who have access to the initiative's professional learning opportunities.

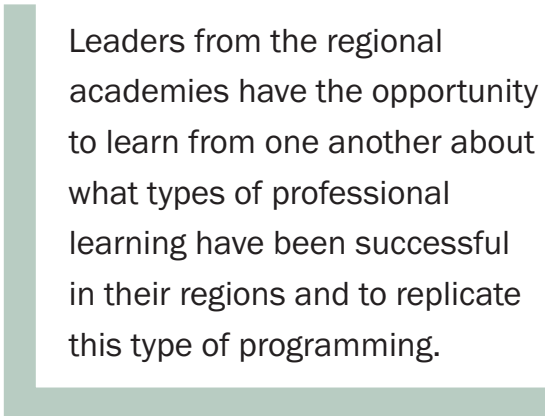
Collaboration Between the State Center and Regional Academies

Just as 21CSLA benefits from the collaborative work between the State Center and state agencies, it also benefits from close collaboration between the State Center and regional academies. In the first grant cycle, the 21CSLA State Center established a system for ongoing communication and collaboration between the State Center and regional academies, together known as the 21CSLA Collective. Collective members meet for learning sessions every week and engage in monthly communities of practice, called Collaboratives, that address specific topics related to programming development (e.g., the Coaching Collaborative, Continuous Improvement Collaborative, UTK Collaborative). At Collaborative meetings, regional academy staff have the opportunity to compare work, share ideas and best practices, and

engage in ongoing learning together. Additionally, the State Center organized two conferences each year that are attended by all Collective members and serve the purpose of reinforcing organizational mission and aligning practices. The State Center also periodically partners with one or more regional academies to host “Inter-Visitation” events that provide professional learning around topics of relevance to regional academy leaders across the state. For example, the first Inter-Visitation focused on rural education and how 21CSLA can support the professional learning needs of rural leaders. In these instances, programming is developed by the regional academies, and the State Center provides support with logistics and administration.

Interviewees noted that the relationships developed through these regular, formal convenings have generated further organic collaborations between the regional academies themselves. The regional academies operate an informal “Regional Academy Leader Network,” which meets on a monthly basis, to create further opportunities for regional academy leaders to connect around their work. Outside of this space, regional academy leaders reach out to each other individually to ask questions, share insights, and align practices.

Through these collaborative channels, leaders from the regional academies have the opportunity to learn from one another about what types of professional learning have been successful in their regions and to replicate this type of programming. The relationships have also generated collaborations on professional learning opportunities that are made available to leaders in multiple Geo Regions. In some cases, these collaborations have been a product of particularly strong interest in a topic (for instance, math leadership) or, conversely, because an event hosted by one regional academy is under-enrolled. In other instances,



Leaders from the regional academies have the opportunity to learn from one another about what types of professional learning have been successful in their regions and to replicate this type of programming.

collaborations have emerged out of a desire to create racial affinity groups that serve leaders of color on a larger scale or to otherwise target professional learning toward marginalized groups of leaders that exist in low concentrations within individual regions (e.g., multigrade teacher leaders). In either case, relationships between regional academy leaders allow them to tap into the networks that other regional academies have cultivated with their regions in order to broaden the reach of the programming they offer.

Collaboration Between the Regional Academies and COEs and LEAs

Interviewees also described the importance of relationships between regional academies and neighboring COEs and LEAs, especially in supporting the needs assessment and participant recruitment. Regional academies lean on COEs’ relationships with LEAs in their regions to spread the word about 21CSLA offerings. The COEs provide the regional academies a platform to introduce themselves and their work at county-level leadership gatherings, or they may directly promote 21CSLA offerings through COE listservs. “A lot of times, a localized approach [to recruitment] works better because they know the person who’s advertising it, as opposed to it coming from a generic Sacramento County Office of Education or 21CSLA website email,” shared the director of Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy.

Some regional academy leaders noted that these relationships did not always come easily. While initially there was a degree of tension between the free professional learning opportunities offered by 21CSLA and non-21CSLA COEs, which offer their own fee-for-service leadership professional learning, regional academies worked to ameliorate this tension by soliciting COEs' input and sharing resources. A subset of regional academies have created formal structures, as in the case of the Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy, which has divided the region into five subregions, each of which is overseen by a "regional lead" at another county office. These regional leads operate as part of the regional academy leadership team and serve as a link between the regional academies and the other county offices and LEAs in those regions.

Discussion and Implications

Despite 21CSLA's pandemic-era launch, the initiative has found its footing and established a strong foundation for continued growth and development. Moreover, in the initiative's first 3 years of operation (2020–2023), more than 8,000 California leaders have participated in 21CSLA offerings. Our interviewees noted that leaders valued the opportunity and have reported changing their leadership practices as a result of their learning, findings that were also reflected in the formal program evaluation. The structure of offerings across regional academies aligns with the research base on high-impact practices in professional learning for leaders. The regional academies consistently center leadership for equity and continuous improvement practices in the localized professional learning, communities of practice, and coaching opportunities they provide. The organization's internal emphasis on continuous improvement and the intentional cultivation of relationships with key stakeholders positions the State Center and regional academies to build on the initiative's strong foundation.

The future of 21CSLA will unfold along with the state's needs and 21CSLA's role within the broader Statewide System of Support. 21CSLA already offers multiple activities to develop leadership talent and continuously improves its work to create greater access and higher-quality offerings.

To support and further strengthen learning opportunities for educational leaders, state policymakers and agency leaders can continue to support and endorse 21CSLA in the following ways.

California's leaders stand to benefit from longevity in 21CSLA operations. The initiative is meeting state and local needs for professional learning; however, the need for professional learning among educational leaders is ongoing. 21CSLA has already begun to establish itself as a go-to organization for leadership support, and its structure allows it to easily adapt content to meet the changing needs of local leaders.

Given time, the initiative can continue to build out systems and services that meet the needs of a growing number of California's educational leaders. As a long-term investment, the initiative has the potential to develop what the State Center director describes as a "lattice of professional learning options for leaders" that address the needs of leaders from different roles, regions, communities, and school types, and who have different identities, challenges, goals, and levels of experience. Sustained operations will also afford leaders access to professional learning on an ongoing basis, which research suggests as a best practice.⁵⁰ Ongoing access creates opportunities for leaders to continually broaden their problem-solving repertoires, adopt new practices in response to changing leadership contexts, and benefit from support over the course of their careers.

Cross-agency communication strengthens the work of 21CSLA and other leadership initiatives. In the first grant cycle, 21CSLA leadership and state agencies maintained frequent communication. In the second grant cycle, the State Center aims to deepen and further systematize collaboration by incorporating state agency staff into the 21CSLA Advisory Council. State agency engagement has helped 21CSLA leaders and state agency leaders share knowledge and build trust. Clear communication channels also facilitated the alignment of 21CSLA professional learning with state priorities and a common understanding of 21CSLA's goals and related practices. State agency engagement also provided state leaders with a window into leaders' struggles and needs. The California Department of Education (CDE), California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), and the State Board of Education

(SBE) should continue to operate as active collaborators with the State Center. This collaboration will be key to ensuring continued alignment between 21CSLA and state priorities and will continue to enhance 21CSLA programming.

State agencies' amplification of the work of 21CSLA could support its reach and access. State agencies could further support 21CSLA's efforts by amplifying its work to local education agencies (LEAs), school leaders, and external school support providers. As pointed out by Placer-Sacramento Regional Academy's director, "CDE and CCEE have a lot of opportunities to advertise and start integrating this work." Similarly, the director for 21CSLA State Center Universal Transition Kindergarten (UTK) Leadership Initiative found that CDE's practice of highlighting 21CSLA opportunities in the P-3 Alignment Newsletter resulted in heightened awareness of what 21CSLA does and how it supports leaders. Continued amplification of 21CSLA professional learning activities and how to access these opportunities could help expand 21CSLA's reach.

Further strengthening collaboration between 21CSLA and other Statewide System of Support entities can enhance interagency alignment. 21CSLA is a key component of California's System of Support, which is designed to address educational inequities and build the capacity of LEAs to improve teaching and learning. State agencies could play a role in supporting further integration of 21CSLA into the Statewide System of Support by facilitating connections and collaboration between 21CSLA and other System of Support lead agencies. The State Center and regional academies have established relationships with other lead agencies in the System of Support at both the state and local levels, but levels of collaboration vary. State agencies are well positioned to encourage interagency collaboration, which could support the development of complementary practices across lead agencies and allow for better sharing of existing resources and expertise. 21CSLA can help the leaders it serves understand how other lead agencies within the System of Support can support their leadership practice and their LEAs, and 21CSLA can help connect leaders with these agencies. 21CSLA's support of UTK implementation provides an example of how state initiatives can work together to build and sustain systems of support. Ultimately, a more connected Statewide System of Support is likely to enhance the capacity of the stronger System of Support.

In only 3 years, 21CSLA has become an important state resource for educational leaders' professional learning, and it is still evolving. 21CSLA continues to strengthen its work by responding to its internal and external evaluations, developing new supports to address changing needs, and bolstering its own infrastructure (e.g., collecting data on program participation, disseminating materials to inform leadership for equity practice). Looking to the future, there is still room for 21CSLA to become more coherently integrated into the Statewide System of Support. There are other possible roles for 21CSLA as well, such as those implemented by leadership academies in other states.⁵¹ For example, 21CSLA can play an important role in strengthening leadership teams, building the capacity of leaders' supervisors, and supporting strategic planning and implementation for school improvement. With its statewide reach and strong partnerships at the state and local levels, 21CSLA is well positioned to continue building a highly qualified leadership workforce across the state.

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