



“The Opportunity to Dream”

How an Early Learning Network Implemented the Liberatory Design Process

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Some images have been cropped from their original aspect ratios.

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Abstract

From January – December 2021, five school districts participated in The Innovation Project’s (TIP) Early Learning Network, an initiative that centers equity in addressing vulnerable children’s learning needs. Participants on district teams underwent the Liberatory Design Process—a seven step approach to centering equity in reimagining and redesigning educational interventions. These seven modes include: Notice, Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Test, and Reflect.

Researchers from the Program Evaluation and Education Research (PEER) Group from the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation sought to better understand (1) how the design process impacted district teams, and (2) the supports and barriers to design thinking and how to improve the design thinking process. Through case study methodology that incorporated focus group interviews, one-on-one interviews, and artifact analysis the researchers found that notions of accountability and intentionality, the awareness of self and others, and developing community partnerships were impactful for districts conducting this equity work. Further, intradistrict dynamics, the availability of resources, team-level dynamics, and non-linear processes frequently acted as supports and barriers to successful implementation of the Liberatory Design Process.

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Introduction

During the 2021 calendar year, The Innovation Project's (TIP) W.K. Kellogg Foundation funded grant, *Transforming Early Learning by Reimagining School*, launched phase 3 of its initiative. In this initiative, TIP and its primary project partner, The William & Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation (Friday Institute):

- developed and implemented Cohort 3 of the 2021 Early Learning Network (ELN), an inter-district network focused on redesigning learning environments to better address the early learning needs of vulnerable children, and
- provided individual coaching for district leaders through December 2021.

In January 2021, the Program Evaluation and Education Research (PEER) Group of the Friday Institute was invited to participate in this project to develop deep dive case studies of participating districts. To that end, PEER researchers analyzed program artifacts and conducted focus groups and interviews with district leaders and the implementation team to learn more about their experiences, including what they perceived as program strengths, challenges, impacts, and lessons learned. The foremost finding was that the Liberatory Design Process enabled the districts to envision a variety of equitable solutions for their communities. As one participant noted in a focus group:

“ Through [the Liberatory Design] Process, [...] we had the opportunity to dream a little bit and see what [equity] could [...] really look like for us. ”

This document is the culmination of the work. The purpose of this case study is to highlight promising practices to be used by schools and districts working to support early learners from an equity mindset.

The Intervention

This project was a multi-partner collaboration that brought together four different teams of stakeholders: the implementation team, district teams, the evaluation team, and the research team.

Focus on Early Learners Roles



Intent upon redesigning learning environments to better support the learning needs of pre-K through grade 3 students, the Early Learning Network (ELN), through support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and The Innovation Project (TIP), engaged school teams and principals from around North Carolina in a cohort-based design process. This process prioritized three cross-cutting interventions: (1) school-level design, (2) coaching for principals, and (3) district-level supports.



The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated programmatic changes to the ELN's design work. This shift, from an in-person and school-based approach to a virtual and district-based approach, emphasized the same three activities as above, but now through selected district teams. These five district teams were tasked with identifying district-level challenges to focus on for the design process. Additionally, Year 3 saw the introduction of the **Liberatory Design Process**.

Liberatory Design Process

[Liberatory Design](#) is an innovative and equitable approach to solving complex pressing problems (Liberatory Design, 2021). It emerges from a "multi-year collaboration between Tania Anaissie, David Clifford, Susie Wise, and the National Equity Project [Victor Cary and Tom Malarkey]" (National Equity Project, 2021). The process underscores the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout and incorporates seven iterative modes: Notice, Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, Test, and Reflect.



Notice: In this initial phase, designers are challenged to practice self-awareness and to recognize how their own biases, assumptions, and values are present in a design context.

Empathize: Attention then shifts outward as designers are encouraged to understand the motivations and experiences of those for whom they are designing.

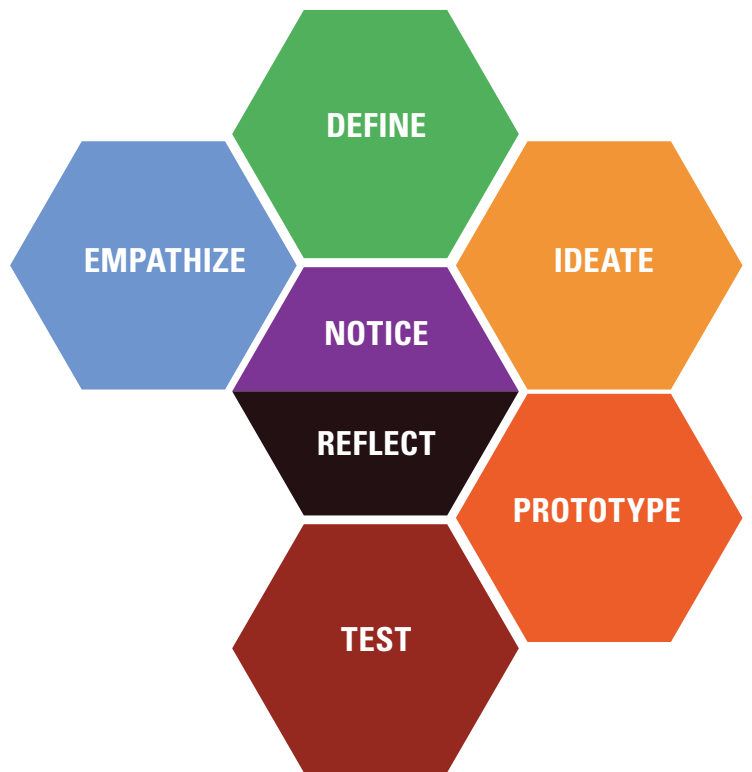
Define: During this phase, designers interact with and gather information from the community to ensure they have a focused understanding of the community's needs.

Ideate: Designers then generate as many solutions to their problem as possible before selecting the top ideas and progressing toward prototyping.

Prototype: When designers Prototype, they create an initial solution to the problem, which permits design teams to explore feasibility and potential roadblocks.

Test: Having refined the Prototype, designers then test their design while looking for feedback and refining their solutions.

Reflect: Reflection occurs throughout the entire design process; designers need to consistently reflect on their actions, judgments, and influence as they design and interact with their community.



Timeline

The following timeline displays the ELN's monthly session goals and outcomes for their work. The ELN scheduled monthly remote meetings with the Year 3 cohort, and ELN staff made themselves available for individual district team meetings as necessary. During the monthly meetings district teams were scaffolded through the Liberatory Design Process.

ELN session goals and outcomes

2020

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER

- Select district design teams

2021

JANUARY

- Review project timeline, project goals, and outcomes
- Discuss the origin and purpose of the Liberatory Design Process
- Explore how self-awareness of our identities influence the design-making process
- Identify additional data needed to amplify voices of those impacted by the design

FEBRUARY

- Expand upon the vision of the TIP Early Learning Network
- Share data collected during the Empathy phase to better understand and define district-specific Early Learning needs
- Explore a common design challenge and/or theme that can leverage district-level and state-level policy
- Initiate the Define phase of design challenge to set the stage for Ideation
- Bridge the Empathize phase and the Define phase, using an equity lens

2021

MARCH

- Review, reflect, and revise, if necessary, design statements
- Practice transitioning from the Define phase to Ideate phase
- Collaborate with and among team members on design statements, "How might we..." questions, and/or ideas

APRIL

- Assess status and next steps on final Design Challenge Statement
- Continue the Ideation and Prototyping phase (if applicable)
- Initiate a planning timeline for Prototyping and Testing

MAY-SEPTEMBER

- ELN to assist district teams with implementing Prototypes

OCTOBER

- Share progress on where teams are in the Liberatory Design Process
- Reflect on the work

DECEMBER

- Reflect on the implications for this work in local communities.
- Learn from design experts
- See [Appendix D](#) for culminating visuals of the final event

Adapted from implementation team artifacts

Methods

Case Study Methods

The research team employed case study methodology. Case studies investigate and analyze a particular phenomenon in its context (Schoch, 2020), and our team studied how five districts experienced the ELN's Liberatory Design Process. Case study design was the most appropriate method for this research as it allowed us to bound our study by researching the use of a single program (Merriam, 2009) and use a variety of data sources, including focus groups, interviews, observations, and artifacts such as meeting notes and exit tickets (Schoch, 2020).



Focus Groups and Interviews

In May 2021, districts participating in the ELN were given the opportunity to choose to participate in either a focus group interview with their teams or a one-on-one interview. Four districts participated in focus groups with two PEER Group researchers, each lasting between 37-50 minutes. Focus group sizes varied, the smallest with three participants and the largest with seven. One district sent two representatives to participate in two one-on-one interviews with one PEER Group researcher, lasting between 38-43 minutes.

Analysis of the six interviews led the researchers to conduct a focus group interview with the ELN's four-member implementation team, lasting 85 minutes. This interview filled in contextual gaps about each district under study, and it allowed for a more thorough understanding of the experiences from the implementation side of the project. The research team coded each interview using a qualitative software called Atlas.ti, which helped the researchers develop themes and analyze their findings.

Artifacts

In addition to conducting focus groups and one-on-one interviews, the research team analyzed other sources of information. These included agendas from the implementation team's meetings, which helped contextualize the team's work. The researchers also examined exit tickets completed by ELN participants at the end of each session. Participant feedback allowed the research team to triangulate findings from interviews.

Member Checking

After analyzing the data, the research team conducted a final feedback session with ELN districts at a meeting in October 2021. This session was also a time for the researchers to member check and ensure that each district's story was accurate. The research team presented its high-level findings to the district teams, asking them to provide feedback on what resonated with them and whether or not the researchers had accurately captured participants' experiences in the ELN.

District Profiles

The research team highlighted two school districts that participated in the ELN from January 2021-December 2021. While all five districts in the ELN showed promise and experienced successes throughout their ELN journeys, we focused on two districts from very different contexts—one small and rural, the other large and urban—to illustrate how they leveraged their resources in different ways. Showcasing districts from vastly different backgrounds can provide other districts seeking to do this work with examples of how to navigate the Liberatory Design Process to implement district-wide early childhood education equity initiatives.

Edgecombe County Public Schools

Edgecombe County Public Schools is a rural district with over 5,000 students. The two major groups it serves are Black students (56%) and White students (30%). There is a smaller population of Latinx (11%) and multiracial (3%) students. About 70% of its students qualify for the National School Lunch Program.

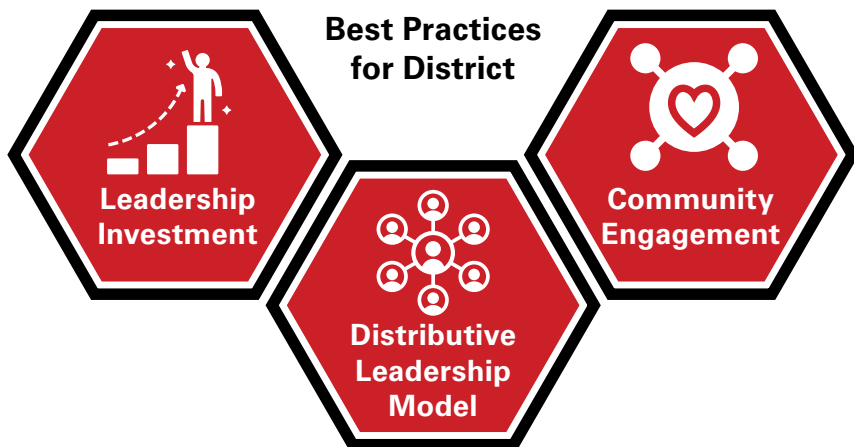
Participation in the ELN

Edgecombe County Public Schools has participated in TIP projects for six years, but they joined the ELN for the first time in 2021 as part of the program's third cohort. District leadership entered the initiative with a passion for equity, emphasizing to educational stakeholders in the district that it was a priority. For example, district leadership communicated its equity-driven purpose to the school board to ensure it was aware of this work. While a strong leader whose focus was on equity played an essential role in Edgecombe's success, its ELN team's approach to leadership contributed to its success as well. Incorporating a distributive leadership model while the team worked through the Liberatory Design Process may have helped create buy-in, where each team member was committed to and felt ownership over the work.

The timing of Edgecombe's participation in the ELN was an important factor for the district. In 2021, the ELN model changed from a school-site program to a district-wide initiative. This switch matched Edgecombe's leaders' own interests as they were already looking into ways they could address high-quality pre-K for their students at the district level. As one focus group participant stated:

“ We’ve had that on the agenda to explore the last several years, and this was just a really great opportunity for us to bring together a group of teachers and central office administrators and school-based administrators to really engage with our community on this issue. ”

Edgecombe's team brought rich experiences to the table, which they could draw upon throughout their work with the ELN. One of Edgecombe's strengths was its history with design thinking. While the Liberatory Design Process was new to them, the essentials were not. In describing how the team drew upon the work they had already done with design thinking, one team member explained:



“ I think it was helpful for us as a district to be able to participate in the Liberatory Design Process. We had some experience with design and redesign in our district, but this allowed us to work on a project that was not school-specific, but was district-specific. It was a place where we wanted to spend some energy that did align with our district goals in the strategic plan. ”

Edgecombe County Public Schools made this process their own, contributing to its successful work. The Liberatory Design Process provided the team with strategies to target its work toward specific district needs:

“ I think the things that we’ve come up with feel really aligned to our specific community and our specific needs. As opposed to, I think some processes where you might just say, here’s three strategies, pick one and try it. It felt much more deliberate and rooted in Edgecombe. ”

Not only did Edgecombe’s approach to the Liberatory Design Process make the work specific to their context, but the team stressed the necessity of listening to community voices. The team explained that they worked to ensure that they were not too far removed from the very people they were serving. They used the Liberatory Design Process to continually return to the Empathize and Notice stages:

“ I do think we’ve done a great job on this particular team of making sure that what we’ve designed does align with what we were hearing from the community and does align with our strategic plan, which was also very community driven. I think the further you get away from that Empathy stage or that Notice stage, there’s more chances that you get misaligned with those things. I think just making sure that whatever we do end up implementing is still connected to the spirit of what we were hearing from our users. ”

Edgecombe County Public Schools enacted best practices that could act as an example for other school districts that engage in this work in the future. In particular (1) their leadership was invested in the initiative and communicated their work with the school board; (2) the team incorporated a distributive leadership model, including team members from various levels of the district; and (3) the team ensured they were meeting the needs of the community they were serving by listening to and acting on their voices.

The Prototype

Edgecombe’s work in the ELN led to the development of a Prototype. The team sought to answer the following question:

“ How might we ensure that every preschool-aged child in Edgecombe County – whether they attend an ECPS Pre-K program or not – scores at or above widely held expectations per the NC Early Learning Inventory when they enter Kindergarten? ”

As this work progresses, the district will work in four areas to reach its goal of providing a quality preschool experience, including community-based Early Learning Pods, an Early Learning Collaborative, a First Teachers Academy, and inclusion of three-year-olds in the county’s preschool programs.

It is particularly notable that the first three areas include soliciting input from and building partnerships with the community, emphasizing Edgecombe’s focus of working *with* its community partners to meet their needs.

Wake County Public School System

Wake County Public School System is a little less than half of its students are White (45%), and it has significant Black (22%), Latinx (19%), and Asian (10%) populations. Three percent of its students identify as multiracial. About 28% of its students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. The district employs over 10,000 teachers and has almost 2,000 district- and school-level administrators and staff. It covers a wide geographical area in the state.



Participation in the ELN

Of all five district participants, Wake County Public School System’s work with the ELN is the most extensive. The district piloted the ELN initiative, and it has participated in the initiative for four years. It experienced the ELN during both its school- and district-based iterations.

Wake’s ELN team leader was enthusiastic about the opportunities and challenges of the ELN and made this work a priority. As one ELN implementation team member shared, there was a sense of renewal when a new team lead took over:

“ I think the transition to their new lead has come at a time with a person that is really excited about this opportunity being passed to her. ... I sense a degree of renewed excitement by her and the team since that’s happened. ... The call we just had with them with introducing a community connection -- that’s going to be really important for their Prototype, I feel like that was, this district has arrived [at] kind of a moment. ”

Wake’s ELN team is large, and it has undergone many changes in its makeup since January 2021. With this turnover, however, the team has steadily made progress toward its goals. While it has navigated the advantages and disadvantages of who should have a seat at the table, the team has grown to include more people who work directly with the community. For example, new ELN team members who have been invited to join include a school-family liaison and a specialist connecting the district with the Latinx community. As one focus group participant explained:

“ But one thing that I will say, bringing [our school-community liaison] on the team and thinking outside of the walls of what we control here in the school system and how we could engage family and community at a different level to help solve our problems, we need a little more time on that piece, I think. But that’s been a great addition, in my opinion. ”

Another one of Wake’s strengths was its receptivity to critical feedback, causing the team to reflect, adapt, and change. The district did not undergo a simple straight line approach from point A to point B as it designed its Prototype. Rather, it regularly returned to early stages in the Liberatory Design Process. Further, by bringing new people onto the team, they realized how essential it was to return to their community members and seek feedback:

“ When we got to the place where we encouraged the opportunity to have [our school-family liaisons] join us, we kind of got there because we’re acknowledging the fact that as we’ve talked about early literacy in the past for our students, we have not necessarily brought the community along with us. It was kind of an afterthought. We then informed them about how we would go about it. What do we need to do? We need to think through whenever we’re doing something and ... we need to partner with our families and community members along the way. So I think that we are moving in that direction and that this has kind of assisted in that process to some degree. ”

Wake’s ELN team acknowledged the difficulties they had in implementing the Liberatory Design Process, explaining how challenging it was to ensure they were on the right track. The team re-evaluated their processes and hit some stumbling blocks, but their reflections on their work led to a high-functioning team that made progress toward their district initiative. In particular, Wake’s strengths included (1) strong and enthusiastic leadership; (2) bringing in new team members who were closest to the people who would be most impacted by the work; and (3) adapting to change and feedback to ensure they incorporated the voices of the families they served.

The Prototype

Wake’s new community-focused Prototype addresses early childhood literacy. The new Family Leadership and Early Childhood Liaison will support Wake’s efforts to meet the literacy needs of early learners through family engagement by “building the capacity of families, schools and community partners, and the early childhood system overall for transformative family engagement.” In its public messaging around the position, Wake emphasizes the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color and families of low socioeconomic status, and it hopes that by expanding the definition of educational leadership to include local communities and families, transformative changes towards equity will occur.

As it states in the job call for the Family Leadership and Early Childhood Liaison, the person who fills this position will spend much of their time developing relationships and partnerships around the community and “will focus on connecting with children and families around literacy and learning within the existing spaces and places of the community like barbershops, salons, laundromats, parks, churches, shopping plazas, and community centers.” By engaging in the community and emphasizing the need for relationships, Wake’s Prototype has the potential to distribute school leadership within its community.



Findings

This section details the findings from the five participating districts in the ELN. Although each finding may not directly apply to every district, they span across multiple districts. The list of included findings has the potential to be used or adapted by other districts that are considering implementing the Liberatory Design Process in their own equity work.

In what ways, and to what extent, has the design process impacted district teams?

Districts were asked to reflect on the ways the Liberatory Design Process affected their teams. Our research indicated that ELN participants were impacted both on a personal level and at the team level. The personal effects contributed to the team's overall dynamics as participants went through deep thinking exercises that caused them to reflect on the ways their own personal experiences and biases impacted their work as educators.

Through the reflective process, team members were more cognizant and intentional in how they approached the equity work they were doing in their district. They became more aware of themselves and the ways their actions affected others, and they had a more thorough understanding of the importance of including the local community and on-the-ground stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Accountability and Intentionality

Engaging in the design process encouraged teams to work at a slower and more deliberate pace. Instead of "jumping right in," teams completed necessary "pre-work," examining their own biases—individually and collectively—and strategized solutions to circumvent potential unintended consequences.

“ *This idea of channeling or identifying your own self-awareness and your values. And understanding that before you enter into or engage is [...] it speaks to just being authentic and self-awareness, and when you're making decisions, it's really important that you keep that at the forefront.* ”

Not only did this process encourage more accountability, but being more intentional also allowed teams to consider creative solutions as they began thinking beyond their traditional schema to retool their strategies with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

“ *We had to think outside of the box, and also we’re working outside of the box, and I think we’re receptive and open to change and to doing things differently. Trying to be student friendly with the process while being fair and objective.* ”

Awareness of Self and Others

Particularly in the Notice phase of the Liberatory Design Process, teams described becoming more intentional and regimented regarding how they “show up” to their work. They discussed being authentic, self-aware, and understanding about how their internal characteristics can influence design. This self-awareness fostered deep personal and professional reflection. For example, even veteran educators shared how this process made them think deeper about their personal and professional decision-making than they had in other professional development-related activities.

“ *I think for me, what I noticed going through the design process with the liberatory cards, if you will, and adding that perspective, made my thinking deeper. I would have to characterize that the work that we did and have done so far as being on a deeper level than similar activities that I’ve been a part of through the decades. As I like to say, just taking that perspective of what are we not considering? Who is not being included and how are we addressing that? I think that was probably one of the most powerful pieces of this whole process.* ”

This rich awareness of self also made it easier for team members to extend grace to others. Educators discussed how the process provided a framework to understand human behavior. Armed with this insight, educators were better able to appreciate the motivations of their peers and colleagues.

“ *I make a lot of decisions thinking that it’s benefiting the child and most of the time, I will say that it has as far as I know, but I’m guilty of making decisions based off my own personal biases. That really was an eye-opener, and not only an eye-opener for what I do, but an eye-opener for why people do what they do. Sometimes, they can’t even help it because that’s what has been embedded into their minds and their culture and their history. It made me be a bit more sympathetic if that’s the right word.* ”

Community Partnerships

Within the Empathize phase specifically, participants expressed the importance of both soliciting feedback from the community and partnering with the community. In the former, teams devised creative strategies to collect input from their constituent teachers, parents, families, and students. Examples included facilitating both informal and formal conversations with families about preschool choices, discussing school and district processes with teachers, and asking students what they liked/remembered about preschool. One participant described how their team was dedicated to “[h]earing from [their] stakeholders and taking the time to listen and probe a little bit.” Another participant elaborated:

“ *The input and the feedback that we got from the teachers and we have [...] [a] good sample of the parents [...] getting input from them and talking to them, that has really helped us as far as planning and developing, carving out our plan for the district.* ”

Building on the idea of collecting data and insights from teachers, parents, and families, teams are understanding how community partnerships are central to their work and incorporating them even beyond this project. As one participant shared:

“ *We need to think through whenever we’re doing something and anything that we’re putting out, we need to partner with our families and community members along the way. So I think that we are moving in that direction and that this has kind of assisted in that process to some degree.* ”

What are the supports and barriers to design thinking? How can the design process be improved?

ELN participants experienced ups and downs during the Liberatory Design Process. We noted how intradistrict dynamics, such as when there was little communication between district officials and the ELN team, and a lack of certainty around the resources available for implementing the final Prototype, made it difficult for participants to feel successful. Sometimes these obstacles led to feelings of frustration and confusion.

Districts did not always view difficulties as barriers. Teams noted that the challenges they faced led to better experiences and enhanced their work. For example, regular reflection encouraged teams to seek more input, and teams invited new members to join who worked closely with students and families. We also found that while the Liberatory Design Process challenged teams due to its non-linear approach to solving their problems, in the end, teammates were grateful for the experience, realizing it had helped them become more cognizant that they were serving the children who were most in need.

Intradistrict Dynamics

As part of their work with the ELN, teams learned lessons about working with each other and within the larger district context. Miscommunications, misunderstandings, and interpersonal dynamics were some of the biggest barriers to feelings of success for participants. Specifically, team members experienced problems when they were not informed about the work they would be doing. In sharing how they were happy to be a part of the initiative but feeling like they did not know what they were doing, one team member who joined late stated:

“ Honestly, when we became a part of the team, we replaced ... no, we weren't asked—and I've been honored to be a part of it—but I didn't know what it was. The first initial meetings ... we didn't know what we were a part of. Literally, we were clueless and still a little confused. ”

During our member checking session in October, intradistrict dynamics acting as a barrier was confirmed when one participant wrote:

“ Intra-district dynamics with position changes plus our work morphing made it difficult (not to mention our work focus changing due to the need to support and address school needs due to the pandemic). ”

Availability of Resources

While many of the district participants that we interviewed spoke favorably of their work in the ELN, the lack of available resources was a barrier. This finding was confirmed in the exit tickets that participants filled out after the monthly design sessions led by the implementation team. Respondents mentioned time and human and economic capital as the most difficult issues to contend with to successfully develop and implement their district-wide plans. For example, one participant shared:

“ Well, the biggest thing is us having the time to, it requires a lot of time. Which, it's nothing wrong with that, but I guess we have to carve that time in, and I think it'll work. I think it's good for us. It's just carving it. ”

It could be difficult for teams to find enough time to dedicate to this work, especially in a pandemic year when administrators, teachers, and staff were spread thin. Further, by participating in a virtual environment, teams did not have the time to meet away from their schools to focus only on this work. As one ELN implementation team member noted:

“ So everything was changing so much all at once, and then you think about [one particular district], having so much happening, and COVID, and their bell schedules were changing and busing was changing and changing when they would see students, with or without masks. It was chaotic. So the fact that any district showed up, to me, was a testament to their dedication to this type of work. ”

Related to time constraints, human capital was a resource that participants struggled with, feeling that there were difficulties when there were too few members on the team to carry out their projects. Team turnover led to vacancies that were not immediately replaced, requiring team members to scramble to fill in and complete extra work. This led to anxiety and frustration as team members attempted to negotiate how to complete ELN work while simultaneously carrying out their daily job duties.

The work was exciting for many ELN participants. They were enthusiastic about their projects, but they shared worries and doubts about putting their plans into action because of logistical problems, such as a lack of funding. One person shared,

“ We’re also trying to be creative and finding funding sources for early learning coordinators who can kind of help lead a parent Academy. When it comes right down to it, it’s like, how do we find the funds to support the exciting work that we really want to do? ”

While the creative ideas were there, the reality of what teams could actually put into practice with the available funding was not apparent.

Team-Level Dynamics

Responses were mixed about the role that changes to team composition played in carrying out ELN work. While there were benefits to adding new team members, such as gaining alternative perspectives, difficulties arose when new people joined in the middle of the work because it required a catching up period.

The Liberatory Design Process was inspirational for some teams as they grappled with biases and became aware of missing, yet necessary, perspectives to include in their decision-making process. One interviewee stated:

“ I would say that early on, we realized we needed additional stakeholders. So in that design process, even though we were all new, we were all kind of navigating. But when we kind of tried to think about what we were going to focus on, then we said, “Who is not at the table?” ”



The awareness of missing perspectives proved important for districts in carrying out ELN equity work. The realization led various districts to add new teammates who worked directly with the community, teachers who interacted with students daily in their classrooms, and a district administrator who focused on equity initiatives.

While changes to the team's composition had many benefits, the process of continually adding new people presented its own set of challenges. New team members did not always have background knowledge about the project they were joining, had missed one or more training sessions, and struggled to grasp the work. One participant noted:

“ *The other thing that I think is super interesting, and I've alluded to this, is that when you're trying to do something new and your players change and, or change frequently, there's a lot of scaffolding that you have to go back and build. We have to do the same thing for kids every day. And so when it's a new process, it's not quite as simple as, "Hey, let me just show you what those seven steps are and you got it and you can move on." There's a lot of, what you have to do is to build knowledge and understanding, where we've come from, how we've gotten to that place. That kind of thing.* ”

The newness of team members and their discomfort with their level of knowledge about the project was apparent during our focus group interviews. They shared that they were answering the questions to the best of their ability but that they needed to defer to other team members to provide more details.

Non-Linear Process

The Liberatory Design Process, while difficult for teams to navigate because it was not linear, was a positive aspect for many ELN participants. Through the messy process, they learned to trust one another and work together to find ways to meet the needs of the students they served.

“ Well, early on we were told to embrace messiness, and we embraced the messiness. It has been a challenge, but not in a negative way. It's just that we all like to set the goal and head right for the goal in a nice straight line, and then look back and see that nice straight line to show our progress. And this experience has not been that, it has a lot of two steps forwards and to the left and the right and back. But I couldn't think of a better group of people to be working with under those conditions because it always felt safe and it always felt like we were making progress. Even when we went back and redid, we still could see progress, but we did embrace the messiness. ”

Receiving regular reminders from the ELN implementation team to be comfortable in the discomfort, teams restarted, rewrote, and re-evaluated the work they were doing. This led some districts to develop Prototypes, while for those that were not as far along in the process, they generated promising ideas for their district's project.

“ Prototypes are imperfect and feedback is a gift. A lot of times you think you got it, you think what you're doing is solid. You try to consider all the different factors and stuff. And once you test something, you might have to start all over again. ”

This was a new, yet inspiring process for teams. As leaders within their schools, they were used to having answers. The Liberatory Design Process, however, encouraged them to take a step back and accept that it was okay for them to not know something and simply brainstorm, working within a larger team who could all contribute their own thoughts and ideas.

“ There were a few of us that weren't quite sure what we were supposed to do. Because we're so used to having the answers, and to knowing the directions, and knowing what the directions are, and I found that that was just such inspiring feeling to know that we're not supposed to know the directions all the time or know the right answers. And it was fun to pull it out of each other, and to just flounder with what we were supposed to talk about. ”



Lessons Learned and Best Practices

The following two sections highlight the district teams' experiences with receiving the Liberatory Design Process intervention in a virtual setting and the advice they offer to other groups considering applying this equity-focused design approach to district-based matters.

Virtual Model

The ELN's need to shift to a virtual delivery model for this iteration of the design intervention elicited both praise and pause from district teams.

Disadvantages to Virtual Engagement

Participants offered several disadvantages to the virtual model. Among these drawbacks, participants noted that working at their computer and trying to focus on the design work required extra effort when other distractions occurred. One participant commented:

“ *It's easier to get distracted because you hear an email dinging and you see Teams messages coming up. And then sometimes when you're in a face-to-face setting, you don't need your computer, all of this happening in the background, you're oblivious to it. So you can focus on the task at hand, but now you have all these messages coming at you at one time and it's harder to focus.* ”

Other participants emphasized the desire to see one another in person, noting,

“ *I like to see body language. And I feel the camera, it doesn't let me see. ... I pay attention to little details [from did] you shake your head to even have you moved your body. That tells me a lot about you.* ”

Similarly, several participants commented on how new relationships are built in person through impromptu conversations during walks to lunch or on breaks between sessions. These opportunities were lost in the virtual environment.

Regarding relationship building, one participant shared that they were new to the district and team and that they were lacking “that connectedness with folks,” having only worked with them online.

Benefits to Virtual Engagement

Key among the advantages to virtual participation was the purposeful cross-team interaction and feedback sessions. Participants reported that these occurred seamlessly and in ways they did not imagine had they been working face-to-face. One participant explained that they most enjoyed “just listening to each of [the district teams] talk and [hearing] how they went about [the design process].”

Others commented on how the virtual model prevented them from disengaging. One participant noted:

“ *I think I would have probably ducked out [to go to] the bathroom. I would have gone and grabbed a cup of coffee because I was confused about what to do. But in our breakout sessions, it just seemed like that transparency was just so much easier. And that was my ... big takeaway, I think from ... virtual and face-to-face.* ”

The ability to document ideas, even unfinished thoughts, from session to session prompted one participant to share that they preferred virtual because “... it's much easier to keep a [digital] Jamboard than it is to keep 20 pieces of chart paper and sticky notes that are flying everywhere.”

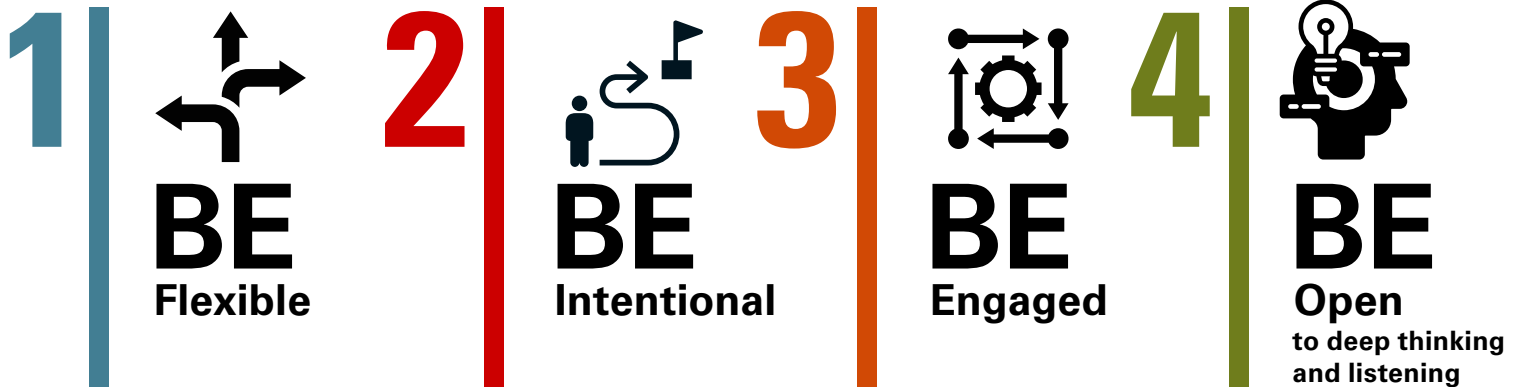
Participants, regardless of their title within the district, consistently shared that they most enjoyed not having to leave their building to attend meetings. Some cited time constraints, others noted financial costs, and others commented on a general discomfort with travel and leaving their buildings. One participant summarized these thoughts:

“ *I know for me as the building principal finding time to leave my building is always very difficult and uncomfortable. We like to be in our buildings. So, being able to do these meetings virtually, whether it's with our own district team or, with [the implementation] team, it was much easier to do it virtually because we have the capacity to meet around our time schedule.* ”

Advice

District teams offered several pieces of advice to other groups considering using the Liberatory Design Process to guide their equity initiatives. Advice offered fell into four key themes: (1) flexibility, (2) intentionality, (3) engagement, and (4) depth of thinking and listening.

States of "BE"ing of the Liberatory Design Process



Be Flexible

Participants noted how essential it was for people to understand from the outset of adopting the Liberatory Design Process that it requires flexibility. Progress often may not look linear, which may cause frustration for some. As one participant noted:

“ You have to be flexible enough to know that you might be on step three, but you might have to go back to step two and then forward and backwards and forward and backwards. So people who are the check the box type of thinkers, they [are] probably going to struggle. ”

Be Intentional

To get the most out of the Liberatory Design Process and to make equitable change, individuals and teams need to be intentional in their work. The work is something that participants must set aside dedicated time and effort to think through and carry out the work.

“ [I]t is a lot of continuous work. So it's not something that you can push aside or put off. It's something that you have to revisit and continue moving forward. And it takes a lot of intentional work. ”

Be Engaged

Related to intentionality, participants expressed the importance of being fully invested and engaged in the work surrounding the Liberatory Design Process. As it takes a lot of effort and thinking, one participant simply stated:

“

You have to be 100% engaged.

”

Be Open to Deep Thinking and Listening

Part of that engagement is around the depth of thinking and listening. The process is not meant to be solo work, and reflecting upon and thinking about the feedback from others on the team and from outsider perspectives is necessary. One participant reported:

“

Along with the [deep] thinking goes, listening; listening to what other districts are doing, listening to what your colleagues were saying, and taking everything into perspective.

”



Conclusion and Next Steps

This case study provided an in-depth examination of the participating districts in Cohort 3 of the 2021 Early Learning Network (ELN), an inter-district network focused on redesigning learning environments to better address the early learning needs of vulnerable children. Over the course of the 2021 calendar year, the Innovation Project (TIP) and The William & Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation (Friday Institute) developed and implemented this network and provided individual coaching for district leaders.

After analyzing program artifacts and conducting focus groups and interviews with district leaders, the Program Evaluation and Education Research (PEER) Group of the Friday Institute was able to better understand the implementation experiences of the districts, including what they perceived as program strengths, challenges, impacts, and lessons learned.

The team appreciates how the liberatory design process is aligned with the Friday Institute's impact area of cultivating equity in education through equity-mindedness. Further, the PLLC is exploring ways to implement the Liberatory Design's mindsets and modes into their daily practice and partnership with others. To that point, it is important to reiterate that this work is far from steps in a process – rather, it's a way of being as a leader. Liberatory Design's modes and mindsets have multiple implications across multiple contexts, reaffirming the Friday Institute's commitment to designing with their stakeholders, vs for them.

As a result of lessons learned through this work, the Kellogg Foundation has awarded TIP a grant supplement to launch the Jeanes Fellows Program. This historically-grounded program will create leadership opportunities, primarily for minority female educators, to teach students while also building authentic and meaningful school-community partnerships. Fellows will learn together and engage in the Liberatory Design Process as a cohort, building on the Findings spotlighted in this case study and deepening district engagement in the approach to school and district transformation developed in the ELN.

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Appendix A: Wake County Public School System's Early Learning Prototype Implementation

Through participation in the TIP/Kellogg Early Learning Network (ELN) during the spring of 2021, the Wake County Public School System's (WCPSS) design team created a prototype for transformative family engagement related to early childhood literacy in the district. The centerpiece of the prototype is the anticipated hiring of a Family Leadership and Early Childhood Literacy Liaison to lead the work described below. The Liaison and other members of the WCPSS team will analyze prototype planning and implementation and engage in iterative design, raising challenges and sharing lessons learned within the ELN to enhance prospects for success and to enable collective learning.

Purpose

The impact of the pandemic has exacerbated the historical inequities experienced by students and families of color and low wealth that will negatively impact academic achievement, social and emotional wellbeing, and long-term social mobility. Systemic and institutionalized racism has created a context that makes fostering deep, authentic partnerships with families and inclusive school cultures challenging. Addressing the ways our schools perpetuate inequalities resulting in low student achievement is essential. A systems level change approach to build the capacity of our institutions and system for transformative family leadership and engagement is required to design new structures and processes that are inclusive, equitable, and culturally sustaining.

As a school district and a community there is a critical need for us to embody our core beliefs and engage in the challenging but essential work of transformative family engagement beginning with our youngest students. Our 2020 goal was 95% of students graduating ready for productive citizenship and higher education or career objectives.

Community engagement is one objective of WCPSS Strategic Plan defined as *To foster shared responsibility for student success by building trust, collaboration, and engagement among staff, families, and community partners*. Achievement defined as *To increase proficiency and growth rates across all groups and eliminate predictability of achievement* is another objective.

Third grade reading proficiency is a predictor of long-term academic and career success. Early literacy is a priority for WCPSS and WAKE Up and Read, a community collaborative serving as the local affiliate for the national campaign for grade level reading. Improving early childhood literacy outcomes requires strong family partnerships, a strong focus on equity, a culturally responsive and strengths-based approach, continuous communication, and established structures and processes to support a paradigm shift in education. While parent engagement has long been recognized as a priority, there is a pronounced urgency to center the experiences of Black and Hispanic students and families as we forge a different path forward in a post-pandemic era. In order to engage families in a way that transforms our schools, we must prioritize building a foundation that can support such engagement.

Envisioning the possibilities

What if we re-engage and re-envision what learning looks like with families instead of for families? What if we used existing and new partnerships as opportunities to engage with Black and Hispanic families in nontraditional spaces? What if we could build deeper relationships with families in high poverty communities?

What if we could share data with them? Engage with them as partners in their child's learning? What if we could create pathways for family leadership, deeper engagement, and more meaningful connections to our schools in ways that increase educational opportunities for students of color, living in low-income households, learning English as a second language, and those with disabilities?

Can we bring school and district leaders into community-based spaces once trust is established? Can we bring that understanding, or better yet those family leaders, to the table to join in the conversations in a way that shapes decisions at the school and district level?

Family Leadership and Early Childhood Literacy Liaison Role

Through collaboration within WCPSS and across the WAKE Up and Read Campaign Community, a designated position of a Family Leadership and Early Childhood Literacy Liaison will be designed as a pilot to begin building the capacity of families, schools and community partners, and the early childhood system overall for transformative family engagement.

This individual will dedicate time and efforts to fostering trusting, authentic relationships with students, families and partners in communities of color and low wealth with the intention of establishing partnerships that will support literacy development of students in kindergarten through third grade. This individual, along with others, will focus on connecting with children and families around literacy and learning within the existing spaces and places of the community like barbershops, salons, laundromats, parks, churches, shopping plazas, and community centers.

Goals

- Utilize a community-based approach to re-engage and re-envision what learning looks like with Black and Hispanic families
- Create a pathway for family engagement and leadership focused on literacy

Planning

- Analyze community and district level data
- Conduct asset mapping
- Establish timeline; deliverables, evidence of success

Implementation

- Use strategies to learn from and with parents/caregivers about their beliefs, practices, strengths and needs for support in regards to early childhood literacy
- Organize and facilitate opportunities to learn about the science of reading and 'learning everywhere practices' in nontraditional ways that are creative, culturally sustaining/responsive, and community centered
- Provide regular opportunities for data sharing that fosters dialogue and drives action
- Co-create solutions with families for literacy supports in schools, homes, and community spaces
- Create a structure and processes that support multiple means of continuous, two-way communication channels between families, WAKE Up and Read, and WCPSS leadership with the intention that family input will shape decision making

Iterative Design and Network Engagement

- Engage in iterative design to continuously improve the prototype in order to achieve project goals
- Incorporate feedback from ELN design teams and program partners to strengthen the prototype and maintain continuity with WCPSS's priorities and purposes for engaging in the ELN and undertaking this project
- Inform ELN participants about successes and challenges of prototype planning and implementation so other design teams can adopt or adapt successful practices and learn from challenges and implementation hurdles.

Resources that will be used to guide the design and implementation of this work (retrieved 7/30/21)

[Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems](#)

[Cultivating a Community of Champions for Children Through transformative Family Engagement](#)

[North Carolina Early Childhood Family Engagement and Leadership Framework](#)

[North Carolina Measures of Success Framework](#)

[North Carolina Pathways to Grade Level Reading Action Framework](#)

[Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Guide and Toolkit: Full Report](#)

Appendix B: Edgecombe County Public Schools' Early Learning Prototype Implementation

Through participation in the TIP/Kellogg Early Learning Network during the spring of 2021, the Edgecombe County Public Schools (ECPS) design team sought to address the following question: *How might we ensure that every preschool-aged child in Edgecombe County - whether they attend an ECPS Pre-K program or not - scores at or above widely held expectations per the NC Early Learning Inventory when they enter Kindergarten?*

The ECPS team conducted numerous empathy interviews with students, parents, and early childhood educators; drew insights from those discussions; and then further defined the challenge. Subsequent ideation sessions resulted in four concepts the ECPS team believes will enable Edgecombe preschool children to enter kindergarten ready for success:

1. The development of community-based Early Learning Pods that spark student curiosity and connect parents with ECPS and one other.
2. The creation of an Early Learning Collaborative that regularly brings together all of the organizations and individuals providing services to preschool children in Edgecombe County for vision-setting, professional development, and service coordination.
3. A "First Teachers Academy" that will provide in-home / in-community support to families of young children, specifically in the areas of early literacy and social-emotional development.
4. The addition of 3-year-olds to ECPS's Pre-K classrooms.

While ECPS, a rural school district, serves only about 6,000 students, the district covers a large geographic area comprising three distinct feeder patterns: North Edgecombe, Southwest Edgecombe, and Tarboro. ECPS's aim is to hire one Early Learning Coordinator (ELC) for each of these feeder patterns.¹ The ELCs would partner with ECPS's current Preschool/Transition Coordinator to ensure all Edgecombe preschool students have access to opportunities like those listed above. While the Preschool/Transition Coordinator is primarily internally-facing, the ELCs would work externally, and be charged with:

- Designing and facilitating Early Learning Pods in each community.
- Convening and facilitating the Edgecombe Early Learning Collaborative.
- Designing and facilitating the "First Teachers Academy" in collaboration with TNTP and the ECPS Curriculum and Instruction team.
- Conducting home visits and collaborating closely with community organizations that serve young children to provide personalized support to students and their families.
- Coordinating with TIP to share lessons learned with other school and district design team members in the Early Learning Network.

ECPS anticipates working with a partner or partners to build the Academy noted above, which will be designed to:

¹ This Agreement does not require the hiring of three ELCs. The parties anticipate that ECPS/Contractor will hire at least one ELC, but ECPS/Contractor will have flexibility under the Agreement to determine the strategies used to address the purpose of the Agreement in ¶ 1 and the four concepts noted above.

1. Provide parents and community educators the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively support students in classroom learning, specifically around early literacy and social-emotional competencies.
2. Guide and support parents and community educators in leveraging their agency to effectively advocate for the needs—both academic and otherwise—of the students in their community.
3. Provide viable pathways to the classroom, either as paraprofessionals or licensed teachers, for parent and community educators interested in pursuing education as a workforce opportunity.

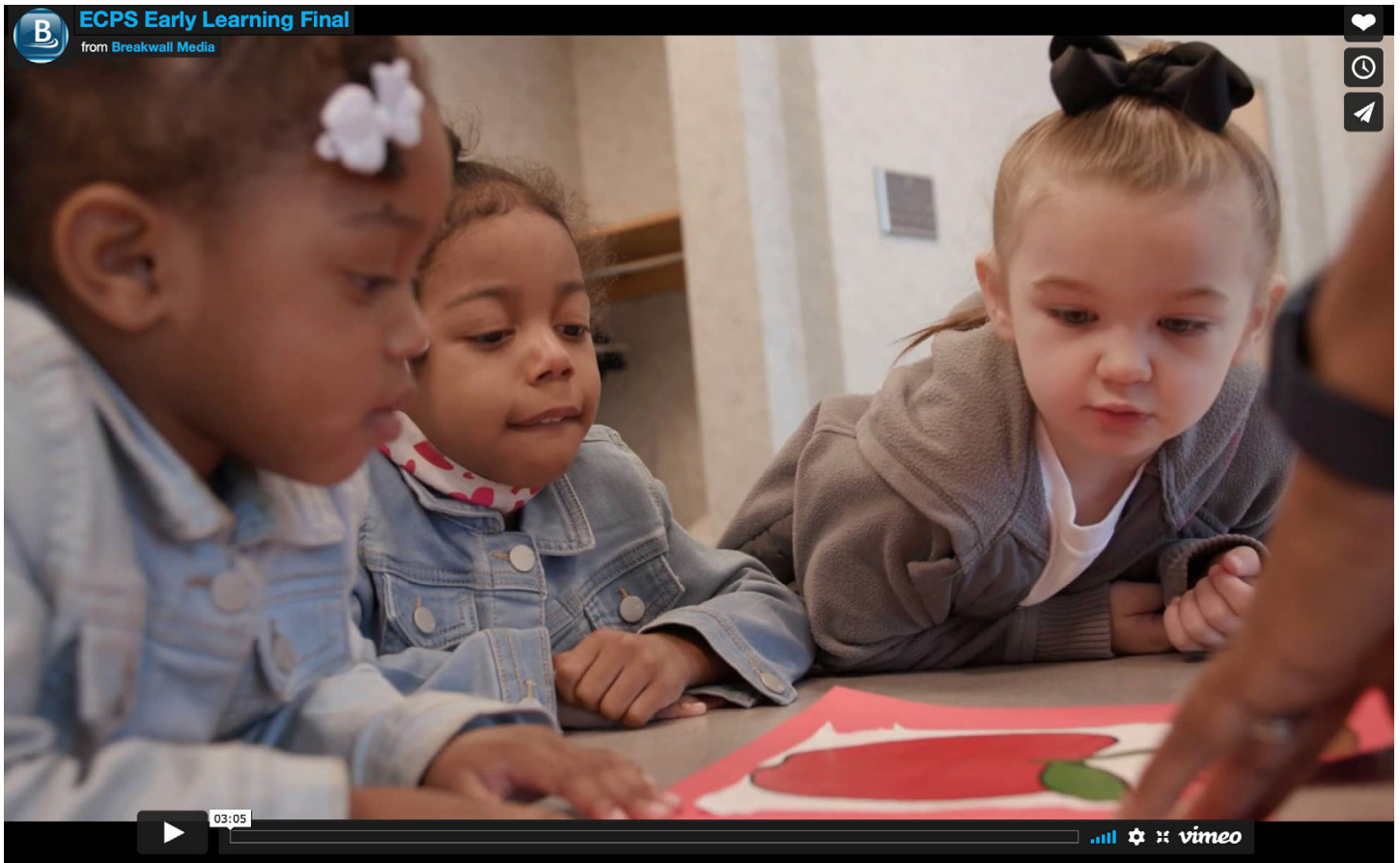
Building the Academy will be a multi-year effort. During the Agreement term, ECPS anticipates taking initial implementation steps in the following areas, though the specific steps and areas of focus may change as ECPS revises its initial prototype design:

- Pilot literacy training for families at Princeville Elementary School.
- Develop learning opportunities for families of all K-2 students.
- Work collaboratively to design learning opportunities for families of 3-4-year-olds.

In each area, an ECPS team will support design and implementation in collaboration with the district's partners.

During the Agreement term and following its conclusion, ECPS will work with TIP to share its evolving plans and implementation lessons with other district and school design team members in the ELN, with other TIP member districts, and with North Carolina educators and innovators outside of TIP districts as appropriate.

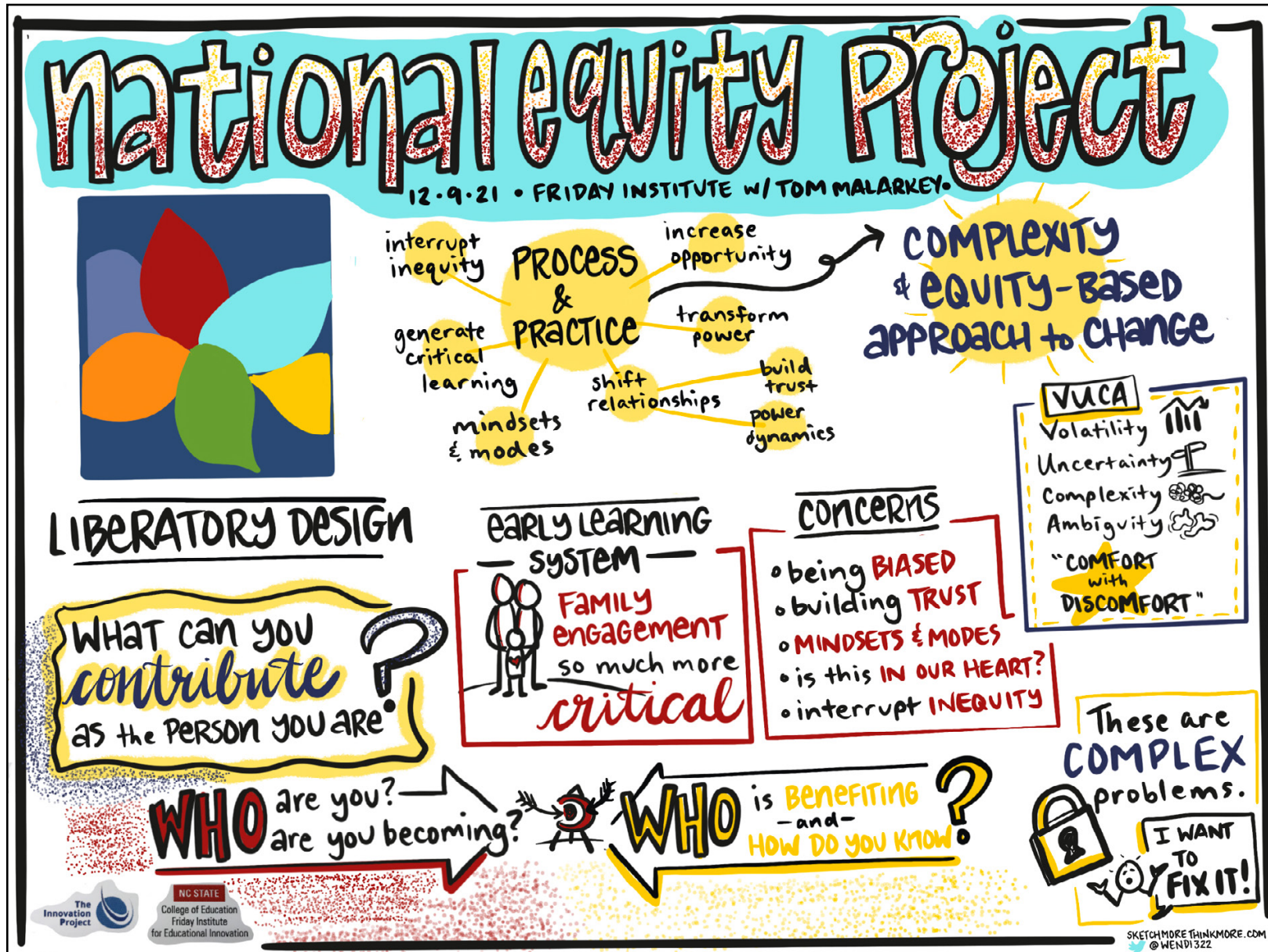
Appendix C: Edgecombe County Public Schools Early Learning Video



Edgecombe County Public Schools video about to assure every child succeeds when they start kindergarten. The video can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/639141474/90d1ecffe5>

Appendix D: National Equity Project Early Learning Panel Event Visuals

These four culminating visuals were produced by illustrator, Wendi Pillars, during the final event on December 9, 2021.



LEADERSHIP in the AGE of COMPLEXITY

- MARGARET WHEATLEY -

entranced by **HEROES**

FIX IT!

"Illusion that SOMEONE can be in control & has ALL the ANSWERS"

STOP waiting for someone to save us

We want to SOLVE, HELP, FIX...
"IF WE don't do it, **NOBODY** will."

versus

leaders as **HOSTS!**

GOOD INTENTIONS & DESIRE to HELP

PROBLEMS are *complex*

Send the HEROES home!

☆ TRUST TAKES TIME ☆

more

- BE CURIOUS
- PROVIDE FOR MORE CONVERSATIONS & MORE TIME

- VALUE ENGAGEMENT
- INVITE for MEANINGFUL WORK
- ASK GOOD QUESTIONS



SKETCHMORE THINKMORE.COM
@WENDI322

MEETING NEEDS of BIPOC students

- BOOK BABIES
- CATE'S CORNER LEARNING PODS
- WRAPAROUND SERVICES
- PRE-K-12 continuum
- KINDER READINESS
- BRIDGING
- EARLY LEARNING PANEL 12.09.21

INNOVATION

THINK BIG

- ADULTIFY
- NEED OPPORTUNITIES
- MORE HUMAN RESOURCES
- SPACE for INNOVATION
- DIFFERENT LEVELS of INTERACTIONS
- PARTNER FUNDING, BUY-IN, & MANDATES
- BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS
- SAME GOALS
- ABSENTEEISM & CORRELATION to academic PERFORMANCE

BUILDING w/ EMPATHY

- BEING INTENTIONAL
- RESEARCH & EVALUATION agenda
- EXPAND the PICTURE
- MORE APPROACHABLE DATA
- PAINT A BETTER PICTURE for PRIORITIZATION

If it's NOT WHO you are, it's NOT GOING to HAPPEN
DR. CHAMBERS

What you believe in is WHAT YOU WILL DO
DR. CHAMBERS

WHO benefits and who is MAKING the DECISIONS?
-Dr. Trice

WE'RE ALL GOING the SAME DIRECTION. IT makes sense to BUILD BETTER PARTNERSHIPS.


RACE-BASED issues need RACE-BASED SOLUTIONS.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE the RIGHT mindset, THESE WORDS & IDEAS WON'T WORK.


IT'S NOT ABOUT DATA. IT'S ABOUT KIDS.

ALL MEANS ALL. FOLLOW the DATA.


ASK BETTER QUESTIONS




MUFFY GRANT




DR. RODNEY TRICE





DR. SANDY CHAMBERS



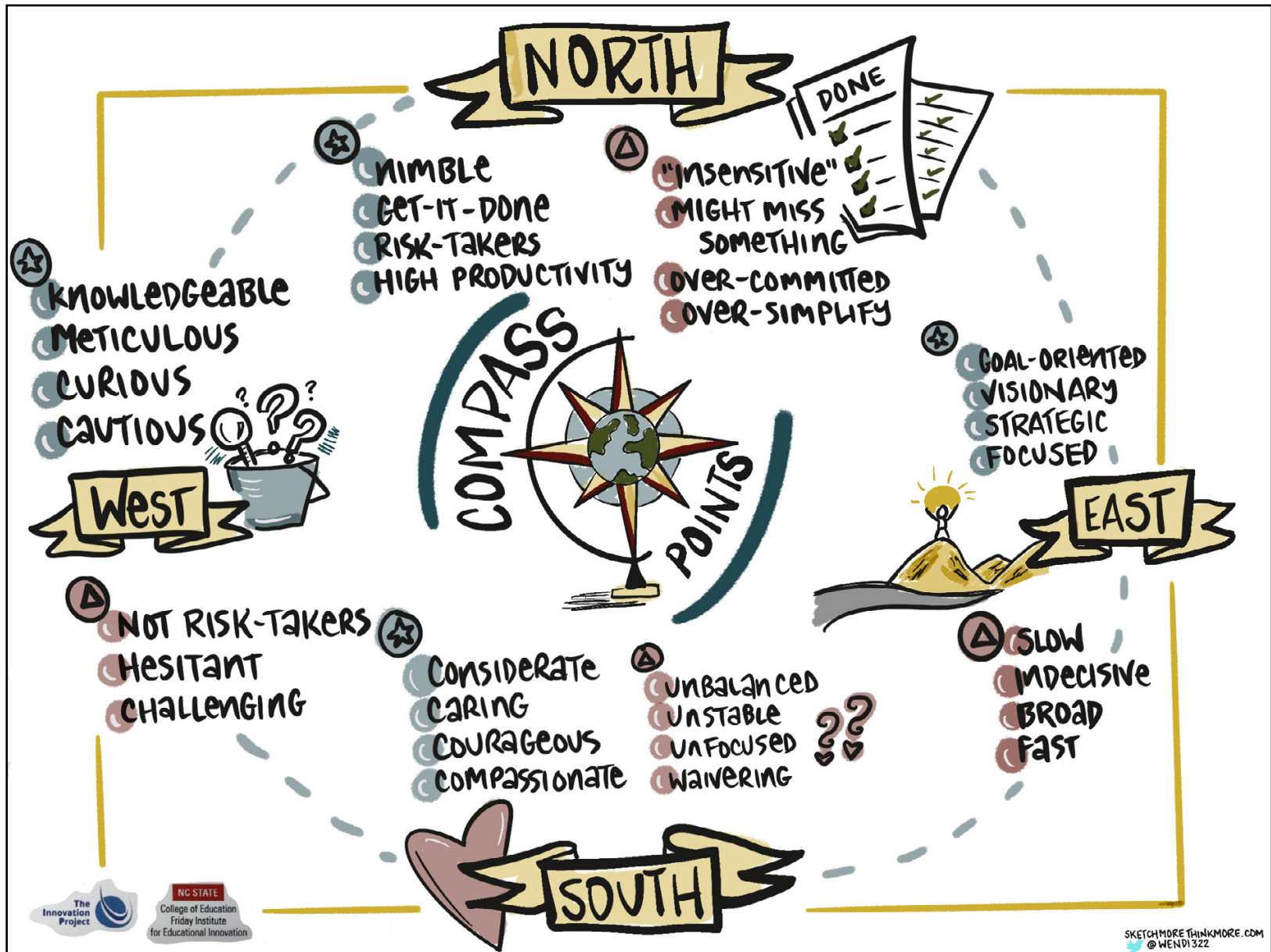
DR. MICHAEL MAHER



DR. CATHERINE EDMONDS

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Appendix E: Photos from the Early Learning Panel

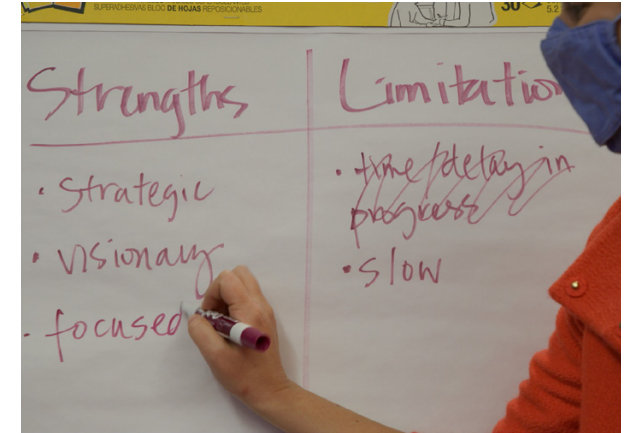
Photos from the final event on December 9, 2021.



A view of the event participants and panelists



Interactive group session



Facilitator takes notes of a group session



Patricia Hilliard, Research Scholar at the Friday Institute, moderates the panel



Panelists from left to right: Muffy Grant, Dr. Rodney Trice, Dr. Sandy Chambers, Dr. Michael Maher, and Dr. Catherine Edmonds



Events participants interact



College of Education
Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

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