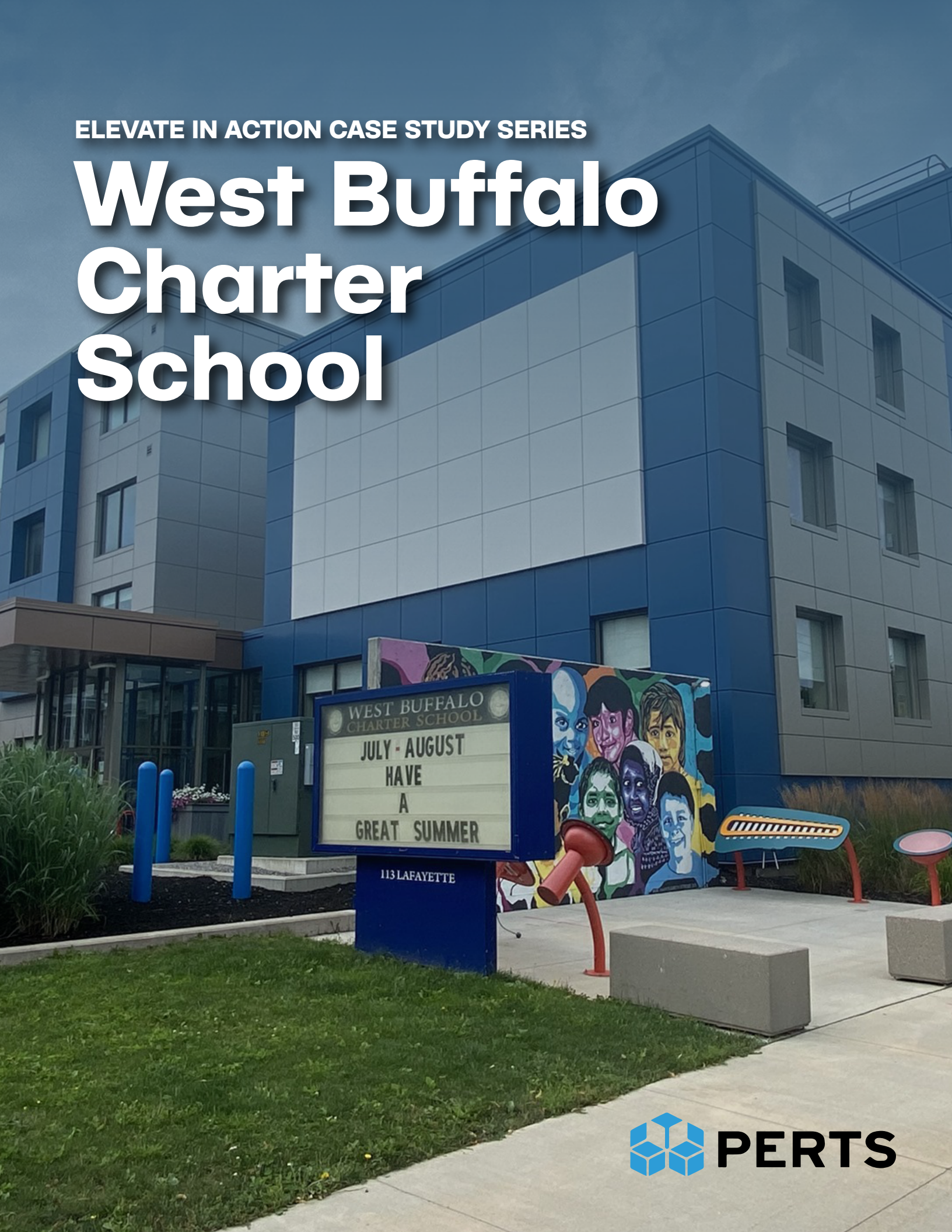


ELEVATE IN ACTION CASE STUDY SERIES

West Buffalo Charter School



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INTRODUCTION

The Elevate in Action Case Study Series documents insights from schools that use Elevate to systematically create **classroom conditions** that increase student engagement and lead to strong academic outcomes. The case studies draw from interviews with teachers and staff, as well as quantitative, longitudinal student experience data collected from students using measures that have been **validated** as early indicators of academic engagement, excellence, and equity.

ABOUT ELEVATE

Elevate is a continuous improvement platform that enables educators to use research-quality measures and analytics to regularly assess, disaggregate, and track classroom conditions over time, as they partner with their students to create a more engaging and equitable learning environment. Educators use Elevate surveys over multiple cycles of inquiry and action to test the impact of new practices. For example, an educator can use Elevate's **meaningful work** measure to learn that only 40% of their students find assignments to be meaningful and then reassess meaningful work to test the impact of a new practice that was intended to make work more meaningful. Elevate is designed to help educators and their learning partners make data-driven decisions about what practices to adopt, adapt, or abandon—and to identify “bright spots” where exceptionally positive learning conditions portend high impact practices that deserve more detailed study and replication.

WEST BUFFALO CHARTER SCHOOL WANTED TO MAKE SURE STUDENTS FELT LIKE THEY **MATTERED**.

Like many schools across the United States, [West Buffalo Charter School](#) (WBCS) in Buffalo, NY, faced a challenging 2020-21 school year. With little time to plan for the transition to hybrid and remote learning in Fall 2020, WBCS staff had to work especially hard to figure out how to fulfill their mission of supporting all of their students to reach their fullest potential.

Recognizing that young people learn best when they feel connected to their school community and know that they matter, WBCS staff looked for resources that could help them connect with students and find out how students were experiencing school during remote and hybrid learning. WBCS leadership learned about Elevate through City Year’s COVID Recovery Project, and they were drawn to the way Elevate centers students’ perspectives and gives students voice and power.

“Education can’t just be punitive, with consequences and discipline... Middle schoolers need to **feel power**, but we weren’t giving them that.

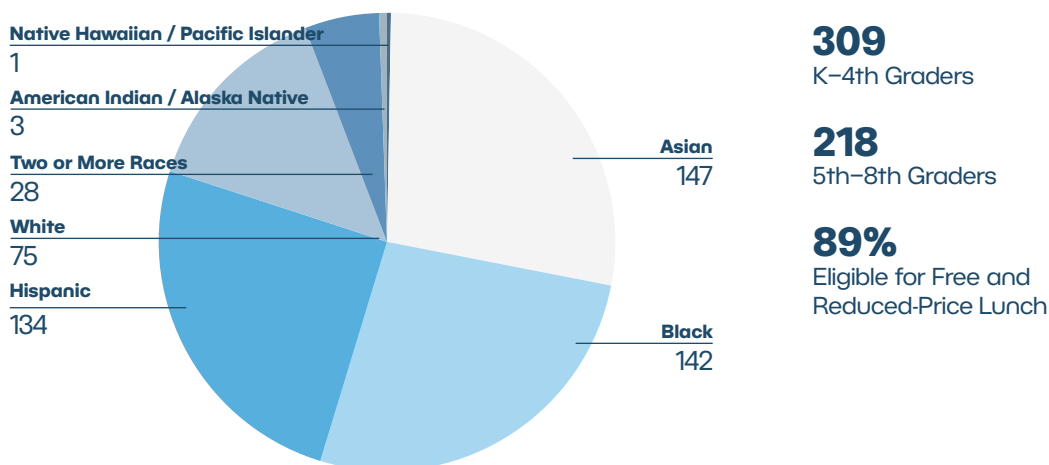
Rachel Banas, Principal, WBCS

The way Elevate asks students for feedback about their own learning experiences resonated with WBCS leadership’s philosophy about student learning. “Education can’t just be punitive, with consequences and discipline,” says Rachel Banas, WBCS principal. “Middle schoolers need to feel power, but we weren’t giving them that. Students do have some power, because they’re the ones doing all the work. There have to be opportunities to feel like they matter.”

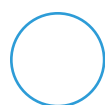
ABOUT WEST BUFFALO CHARTER SCHOOL

West Buffalo Charter School is a K-8 school community of Buffalo, NY, with the majority of students being students of color, and nearly all qualifying for free and reduced price lunch. Most WBCS students live in the community immediately surrounding the campus.

ENROLLMENT CHARACTERISTICS (2020-2021 SCHOOL YEAR)



Beginning in Fall 2020, WBCS ran a small pilot of Elevate with their fifth- through eighth-grade students. The data from the pilot helped them understand students' experiences during remote and hybrid learning. Then, as students returned to primarily in-person learning in Fall 2021, WBCS embarked on a larger-scale effort to systematically collect and act on students' feedback about their learning experiences: eight teachers completed five cycles of continuous improvement with 204 students (97% of fifth through eighth graders) across 32 classes. **These efforts resulted in significant school-wide improvements in learning conditions over the course of the 2021-22 academic year.**



HOW WBCS CREATED ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

We have recognized clear patterns across multiple partnerships around which conditions best equip teachers to engage with their Elevate results for meaningful improvement. For example:

● PROTECTED TIME

Teachers need protected time to reflect on their Elevate results and to identify and implement the changes they'll make in response to those results. (By comparison, the actual administration of the survey takes very little time and can be assigned as homework.)

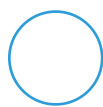
● COHERENCE & ALIGNMENT

Teachers are more engaged when school leaders are clear about how Elevate aligns with other school initiatives. These components work best when teachers understand how other school initiatives benefit from improving conditions (conceptual alignment) and when Elevate data collection, reflection, and planning are built into existing processes, like recurring grade level meetings or PLC meetings (logistical alignment).

● TRUSTING, GROWTH-ORIENTED PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

Especially at first, some teachers may need help to interpret their students' feedback or to process their own emotional reactions to the feedback. Support from trusted colleagues and administrators in a community of practice (CoP) can help teachers understand the results and feel assured that the data will not be used in a punitive way against them. Both can help teachers engage with and respond to data productively.

The next few pages describe how WBCS was able to establish these supportive conditions for teachers and, in so doing, empower teachers to make exceptionally strong improvements in students' learning conditions school-wide (as described in the last section). The core of their strategy involved integrating multiple complementary initiatives into a single, coherent effort.



STRONG CURRICULA SUPPORTED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AT ALL GRADE LEVELS

At WBCS, Elevate formed part of a broader mission to connect with all students and support them to reach high levels of learning, along with Expeditionary Learning¹ and Culturally Responsive teaching initiatives²⁻³, each of which is described below.

EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING

The Expeditionary Learning (EL) framework prioritizes the quality of students' work and character by developing critical thinking and communication skills through complex school work. Emphasis is placed on student work that is connected to real-world issues and is meaningful to the community beyond the school. In EL curricula, students often engage in long-term projects that address issues relevant to the local community and unite learning across multiple subject areas (eleducation.org).

“There’s a whole unit on the Erie canal, and it’s right down the street. We have experts come in, people who work in the field trips or people in the building. But we have done virtual field trips around these things... You can have member of science museum give a [virtual] presentation on what we have in Buffalo.

Rachel Banas, Principal, WBCS

WBCS teachers incorporated these principles into their curriculum in a variety of ways. While the pandemic made it difficult to do enriching activities such as indoor on-site visits to places in the community, or bringing speakers from the community inside the school, they nevertheless found ways to incorporate EL during the 2021-22 academic year.

For example, third graders engaged in a three-month unit on water conservation in their city. They explored water from many different perspectives, including how it impacts them where they live and how different cultures have used water throughout history. The unit culminated in a field trip to the power vista in Niagara Falls. Although this example comes from students younger than those who are using Elevate, it illustrates how children at WBCS are exposed to engaging, community-focused learning projects from an early age, which helps explain why even at the start of the 2021-22 academic year, meaningful work was rated extremely highly (see below). Older students are also routinely asked to take what they are learning and apply it to the close neighborhood, the school community, family, etc. — and they have a lot of practice in doing this from years of participating in rich learning experiences.

The Elevate data reveals the impact of these strong practices. WBCS started the year with 76% of students reporting strong levels of meaningful work (i.e., feeling that their school work is meaningful and not busy-work, and that what they learn is interesting and connected to real-life — see perts.net/elevate/measures-refs for details), compared with 64% of students across the entire Elevate user base (see perts.net/elevate/trends for details). This high baseline at the start of the year likely reflects the years of investment that WBCS had already made to develop meaningful assignments and curricula for students, beginning in early elementary school.

In addition, students at WBCS also increased how much they reported experiencing meaningful work from this already-high baseline over the course of the 2021-22 academic year, with 80% of students reporting strong meaningful work by the end of the year⁴— a statistically significant increase. From teachers’ perspectives, seeing these patterns in the Elevate data was validating — it let them know that they were making progress in their mission.



STUDENTS SAY WORK IS MEANINGFUL AND CONNECTED TO REAL-LIFE BECAUSE...

“Math is around us and we do math every day rather [sic] you are baking, cooking or passing out treats your still doing math.”

“So we know what happens so history doesn’t repeat.”

“We learn about the ecosystem and how to help it.”

“We learn about people who aren’t as lucky as us (clean water, good education, etc.)”

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

In parallel with their EL initiative, WBCS also employed Culturally Responsive Teaching during the 2021-22 academic year²⁻³. The student body at WBCS consists of students from many racial and ethnic backgrounds, with children of color making up 86% of the student body. As is often the case in schools serving students of color, the teaching and administrative staff at WBCS consists predominantly of white women. It is therefore especially important for the curriculum at WBCS to be culturally inclusive. “We have several white female teachers, and that’s not the majority of who we’re teaching,” says WBCS principal Rachel Banas.

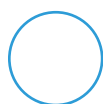


We spend a lot of time talking about what is culture... Not just religion and ethnicity , but small things, like chores around the house, expectations of going to college. How does gender, time, place affect who we become?

Mariah Allaire, Teacher, WBCS

In order to ensure that all students feel accepted and valued while learning about other perspectives, WBCS leaders and teachers work hard to bring the ideals and values of diverse cultures into classroom discussions, texts, and curriculum. This occurs in different ways depending on the subject area.

In a history or language arts class, there might be explicit reflection on how culture influences our lives, from big ways to small ways. In a science class, it might be learning about how different cultures use water, and how water use affects the local community. In many ways, WBCS’ approach to Culturally Responsive Teaching is synergistic with the holistic, interdisciplinary nature of Expeditionary Learning.



WEAVING ELEVATE INTO A COHERENT STRATEGY PROTECTED TEACHERS' BANDWIDTH.

Of course, doing three initiatives (Elevate, Expeditionary Learning, and Culturally Responsive Teaching) at the same time has the potential to be overwhelming for both teachers and students, rather than supportive of their growth. But at WBCS, these initiatives were carefully woven together in such a way that the goals of each initiative felt like a single set of priorities. Time set aside to reflect on Elevate data was also spent refining teachers' approach to Expeditionary Learning and Culturally Responsive Teaching, rather than treating it as an "extra" thing done on the side. As schools across the country are grappling with teacher burnout,⁵ this alignment is vital to the success of school improvement initiatives.

PARTICIPATION WAS CONSISTENTLY HIGH ACROSS FIVE CYCLES OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

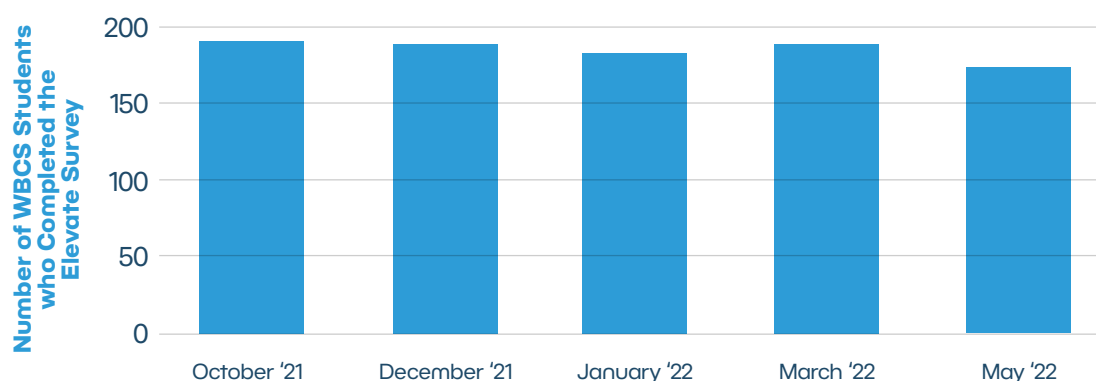


Figure 1. Student participation in the Elevate survey across five survey cycles from October '21 through May '22. Nearly 200 of 212 5th-8th graders participated each time, with very little drop-off in participation over the course of the year.

The way WBCS implemented Elevate points to a couple of strategies for achieving this alignment, described below. The result was that fifth through eighth grade teachers at WBCS surveyed 212 students in 32 classes four to five times between October 2021 and May 2022, with 97% of students participating at least once. Survey participation remained high throughout the course of the year. This consistently high participation was made possible by several strategies:

- **NATURAL "SLOTS" WERE USED FOR ELEVATE SURVEYS AND REFLECTIONS**

As part of their mission to ensure high levels of learning for all students, WBCS conducts quarterly formative assessments. Because the Elevate survey is brief (5-10min), it was possible to add the survey to the formative assessment blocks without making them significantly longer. Therefore, teachers did not have to find their own class time to administer the survey. Additionally, since WBCS used a CoP model to implement Elevate, grade-level team meetings were scheduled at the start of the year and held during protected times in the school day.

While not all schools complete quarterly formative assessments, we highlight this strategy because it points to a useful question that schools and districts can ask themselves when considering a program like Elevate: is there an existing “slot” that the Elevate surveys can fit into? If not, is it possible to create a slot for the surveys, such as by setting aside a week every few months to complete them? Could visits to a computer lab be scheduled at the start of the year? The more logistics are handled by school leadership, the more individual teachers can devote their attention to learning from the data and workshoping their practice.

● **CLEAR CONNECTIONS WERE MADE BETWEEN ELEVATE AND OTHER SCHOOL PRIORITIES.**

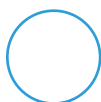
Going into the 2021-22 school year, WBCS prioritized two central school-wide initiatives: Expeditionary Learning¹ and Culturally Responsive Teaching²⁻³— see the section below for details. From the beginning of the academic year, Elevate was understood by teachers and school leadership as a means of understanding the impact of these initiatives. We recommend that when school leaders are in the planning phase of using Elevate, they map out the other ongoing initiatives that teachers are participating in, and articulate their vision for how they expect Elevate to support or align with those initiatives.

● **THE WHOLE SCHOOL COMMUNITY FELT OWNERSHIP OF ELEVATE DATA.**

Although teachers were the primary people collecting and reviewing Elevate data, many people helped make meaning of the data. Several teachers talked with students directly about data in their reports, posing questions such as, “What makes work feel meaningful to you?” Social workers who typically conduct social and emotional learning sessions with students used Elevate data to inform their conversations with each class. And school leaders integrated Elevate data into their strategic planning. Thus, Elevate data became property of the whole community at WBCS. Importantly, this was done while still maintaining confidentiality of individual teachers’ data. Teachers were able to share their individual Elevate reports if they wished, but administrators and other staff only saw school-wide data pooled together, unless a specific teacher elected to share their own results.

“When I combine [Culturally Responsive Teaching] with the Elevate data, I love the demographic breakdowns in terms of gender ethnicity, culture. Am I making sure that I’m honoring all cultures of my students? Is there a demographic that’s not being heard/seen?”

Teacher, WBCS



SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE ENRICHED THE LEARNING THAT CAME FROM ELEVATE.

WBCS used a CoP model in which grade level teams convened after every survey cycle to gather meaning from the data and decide what actions to take based on what was learned. WBCS teachers experienced many of the [emotional reactions](#) that are commonly seen when reflecting on Elevate data. While some teachers were excited from the beginning, some were initially overwhelmed and even discouraged by scores that were lower than they hoped.

“We have teachers who maybe when we started this were like great, I get to hear about how much the kids don’t like me... now that we’ve implemented it for about a year now, and they’re seeing like, wow, I’m able to self-reflect on this, and make changes just in things in my classroom and that’s helping the students.

Erin Higgins, Assistant Principal, WBCS

Through the CoP, grade level teams compared notes and found context for the patterns they saw in their own classroom’s data (which are private to each teacher). Teachers were also able to discuss commonly observed gaps in student experience by race and gender, which Elevate automatically disaggregates. Several individual teachers began selecting single Elevate questions to administer to their classes in paper-and-pencil form, as students were exiting class. These exit tickets helped teachers see how individual lessons were resonating with students.⁵

Eventually, the group started to see substantive improvements in their data. This improvement was particularly encouraging because it helped teachers see that their hard work was having an impact. Students’ open-ended responses to survey questions also helped teachers understand more specifically what was landing with their students, which helped them do more of what was working.

“Well what I do first [when I get my reports’] is look at the amazing comments. You definitely get a little bit of ego boost [when] you see the nice things that your students wrote.

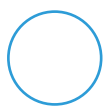
Mariah Allaire, Teacher, WBCS



HOW ONE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER SCAFFOLDED STUDENTS' OPEN RESPONSES

For young people, responding to Elevate's open-ended questions may draw on skills they are just developing. For WBCS 7th-8th grade language arts teacher Mariah Allaire, teaching young people to express complex ideas in writing is at the core of her professional mission. So when she asked her students to provide open-response feedback about their experiences in her class, her first thought was to fold the Elevate survey into her broader curriculum for teaching written communication. Below are some strategies that were particularly effective:

1. **Start with accessible topics.** Middle school students are going through a socially sensitive time (they're "embarrassed of the world," at that age, says Ms. Allaire). But the Elevate learning conditions get to the heart of young people's experience in school, which might be hard for shy teenagers to talk openly about. Ms. Allaire recommends building discussion skills around more neutral topics (such as whether pineapple belongs on pizza) before diving into discussing learning conditions.
2. **Use verbal discussions to build communication skills.** Ms. Allaire's students participate in structured discussions of neutral, concrete topics, beginning at the start of the year. They work in groups to do research and build their arguments. Groups ask each other clarifying questions before responding to each other, and in the end, they work to find a consensus. Over time, these discussions build both the skills and the trust for students to delve into more emotionally charged topics as the year goes on.



AS A RESULT OF THESE EFFORTS, WBCS IMPROVED LEARNING CONDITIONS SCHOOL-WIDE.

WBCS teachers' efforts paid off for their students in the 2021-22 academic year. Figure 2 shows the overall trends in each learning condition in WBCS over time. Each of the six learning conditions that they measured showed school-wide improvement over the course of the year. This improvement was statistically significant across the six learning conditions,⁶ with a probability less than .00001 that the improvement could be due to chance alone. Given that in the absence of intentional efforts to establish positive learning conditions, learning conditions **typically get worse** over the course of the academic year, these marked improvements were especially encouraging.

THE PERCENTAGE OF WBCS STUDENTS EXPERIENCING POSITIVE LEARNING CONDITIONS INCREASED THROUGHOUT 2021-2022

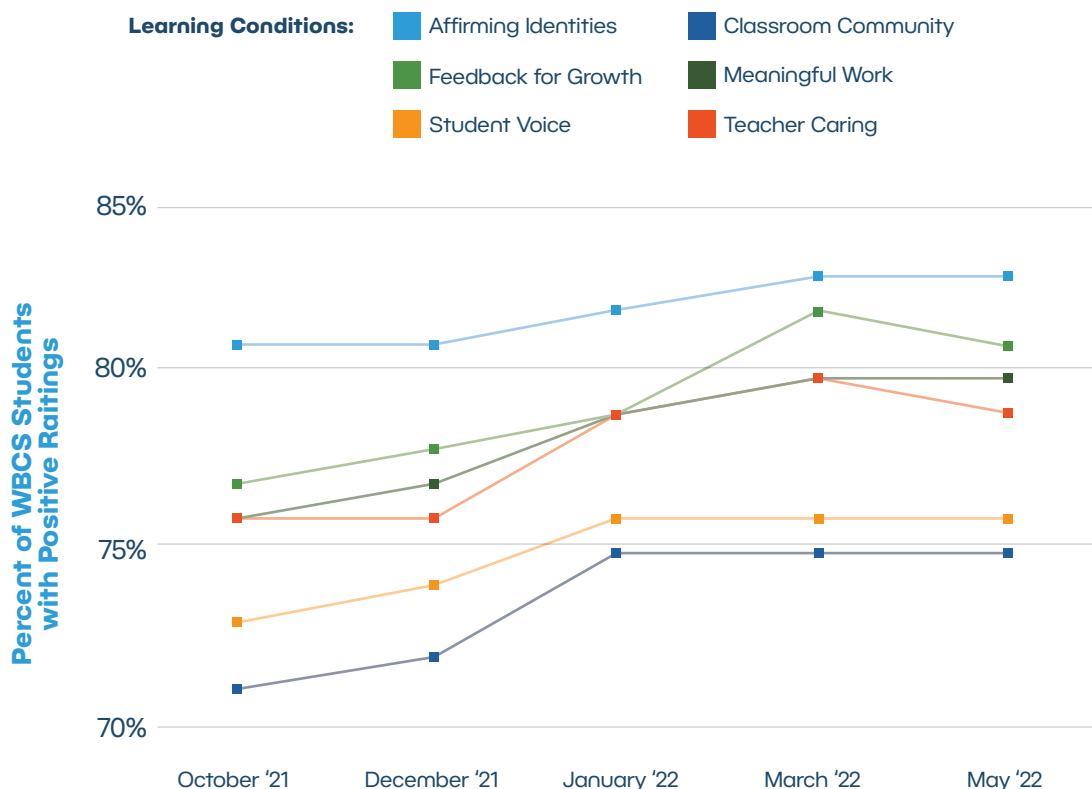


Figure 2. Percentage of WBCS students experiencing each of 6 learning conditions positively over five continuous improvement cycles between October '21 and May '22.

Learning conditions improved steadily over time, with the biggest improvements happening between the second and fourth surveys (i.e., between December and March of the academic year), and a bit of a leveling off happening from March to May '22, perhaps due to the school year winding down. This is consistent with results from other sites, where the biggest improvements usually do not happen after just two surveys. It usually takes at least 3-4 cycles of talking about the data, learning from it, and incorporating changes, to start to see meaningful improvement at a school- or district-wide level.

The gains in some classes also massively exceeded these school-wide average improvements. Figure 3 shows the distribution of improvement scores for each learning condition at WBCS. Several teachers moved the needle by as much as 10, 15, or even 20 percentage points on various learning conditions. These positive outliers are sometimes called bright spots, and can represent opportunities to deepen learning and improvement. For example, while Meaningful Work improved by four percentage points on average, many teachers moved the needle on Meaningful Work by twice that, and some by as much as 20 percentage points. Conversely, some teachers saw scores go down instead of up. When certain teachers or classes show outsized improvements (or unusually high scores overall), it is worth asking, “what are they doing that’s working?” It is possible that teachers in those classes are using a strategy that is particularly effective. Another possibility is that they are using the same strategy as others, but in an unusually effective way. Discussions during CoP meetings can surface these kinds of insights and help CoPs figure out what may be working best for their particular student body. To support these discussions, Elevate provides several CoP [protocols](#).

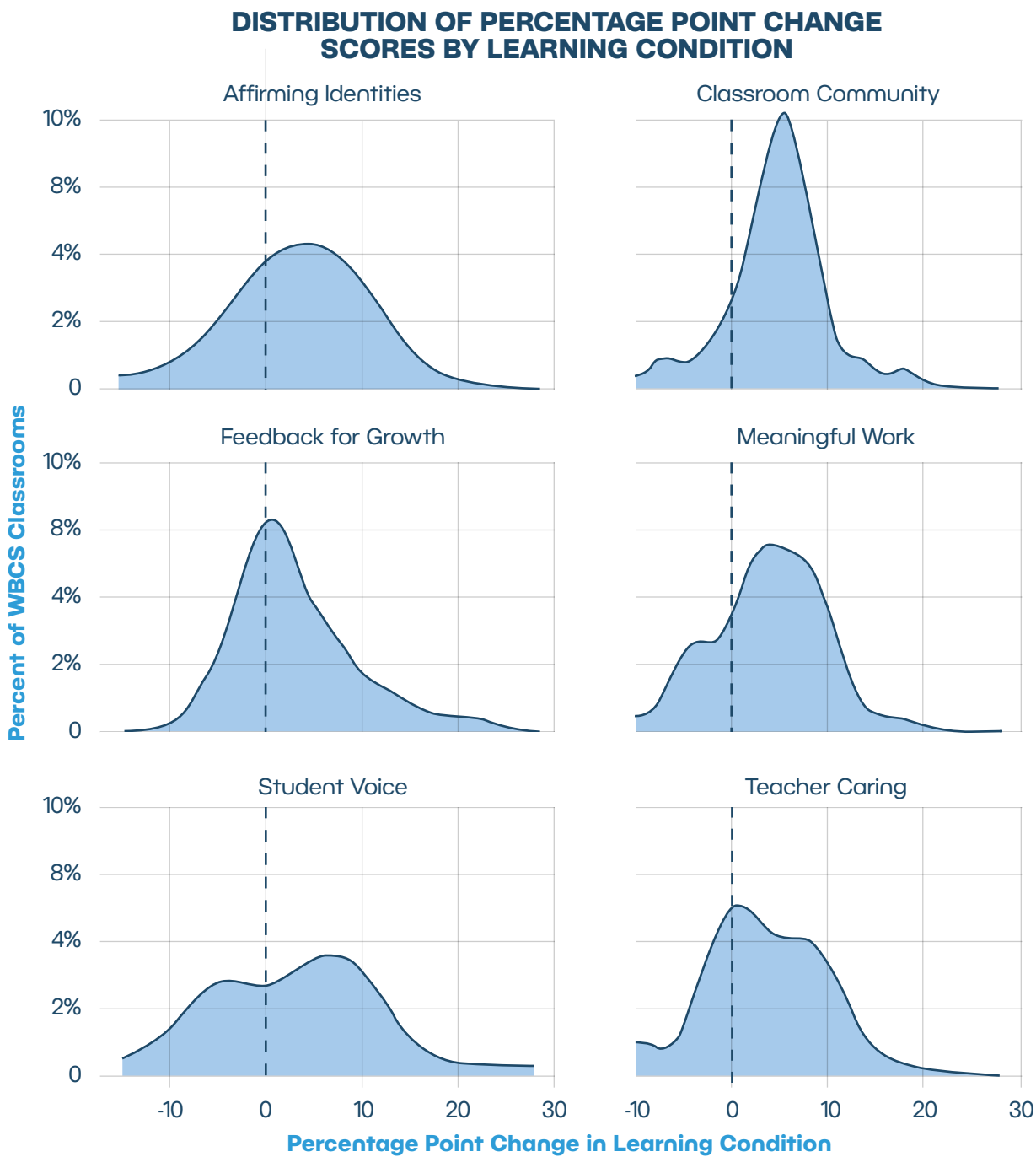
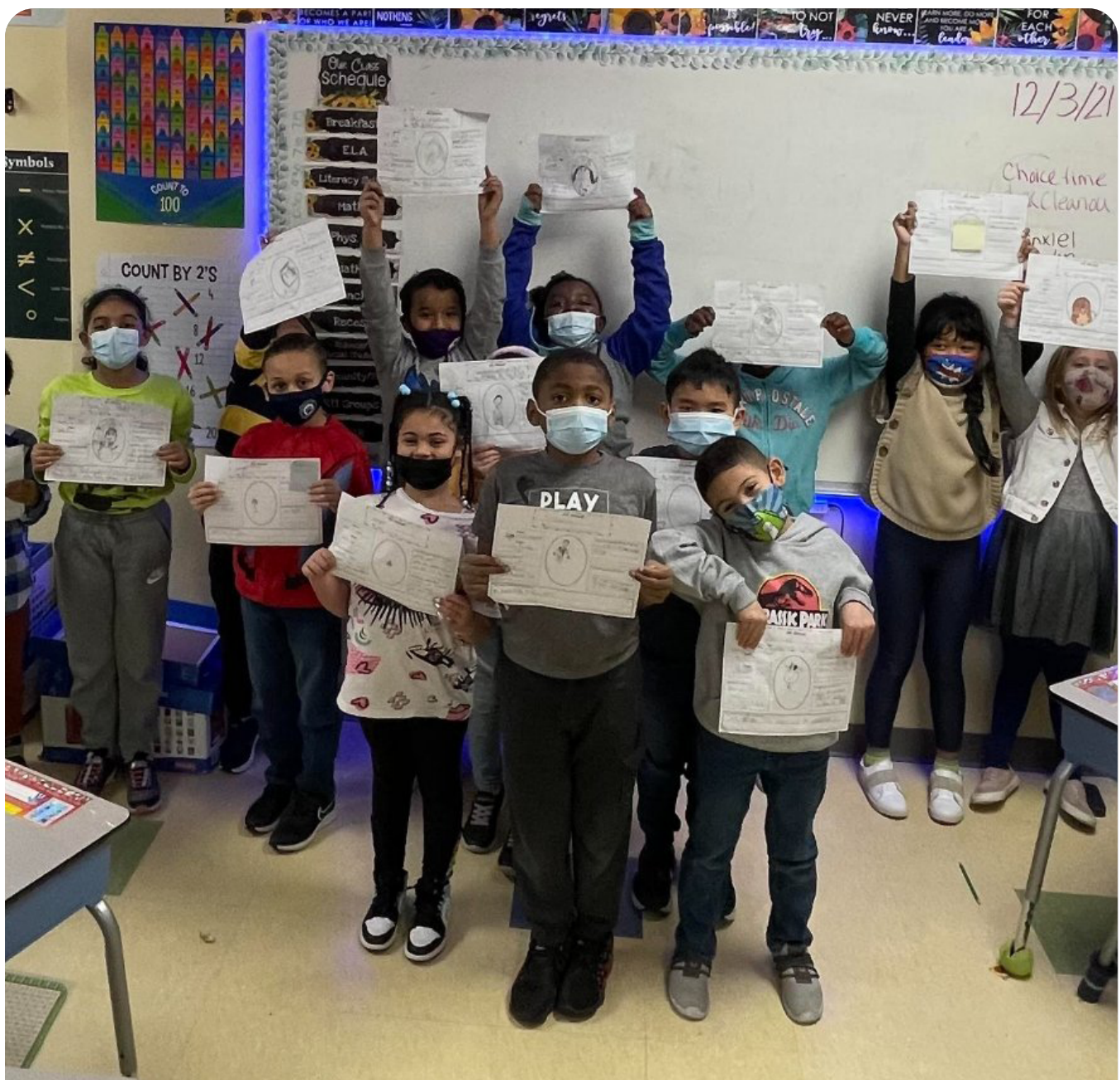


Figure 3. Density plots showing the distribution of class-level change scores, computed as average percent of students experiencing the learning condition positively at survey 5 minus the average percent at survey 1 for each WBCS class.

CONCLUSIONS

West Buffalo Charter School used Elevate to deepen their work with Expeditionary Learning and Culturally Responsive Teaching, ensuring that those initiatives were really making a difference in the students' classroom experience. They wove Elevate together with these priorities seamlessly and worked the Elevate data into the school calendar and the fabric of the school community. Supportive Communities of Practice met during protected times throughout the year to discuss and learn from the data. As a result, WBCS' already-high percentage of students experiencing positive learning conditions increased significantly over the course of the 2021-22 academic year. WBCS is excited to deepen these gains in the 2022-23 academic year.



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2. Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin / Sage.
3. Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
4. A rich framework like EL is likely to touch on multiple learning conditions, which may explain why WBCS saw gains in constructs other than meaningful work over the course of the year; see “As a result of these efforts...,” above.
5. Marshall, D. T., Pressley, T., Neugebauer, N. M., & Shannon, D. M. (2022). Why teachers are leaving and what we can do about it. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 104(1), 6–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00317217221123642>
6. Individual teachers also have the option of turning on only a single learning condition in Elevate, if they wish to administer smaller surveys between their major survey cycles.
7. A model was fitted to class-level data regressing the percent of students in the “positive” range for each class on time (first survey, last survey) and learning condition, with a random intercept for student homeroom class — a variable that tracks unique groups of students who take all their classes together. The percent of students in the positive range at last survey was significantly higher than the first survey across learning conditions, $\beta = 3.33$, $p < .00001$.