

# Building Cultural Competency Through Conversations

A case study of  
Diversity Talks  
youth-led workshops

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# Diversity Talks Overview

Diversity Talks aims to increase the cultural competency of adults by fostering a healing space for them to engage in culturally relevant and responsive conversations with young people. By partnering with schools and school systems to do this work, Diversity Talks aims to create educational contexts where every young person has a voice in their learning; an opportunity to engage in culturally relevant and responsive conversations; and ultimately, a seat at the table. Diversity Talks' approach to increasing cultural competency in schools and school system partners starts with a youth facilitator fellowship, followed by a youth-led professional development course for adult educators. The youth facilitator fellowship is a 30-hour training that equips youth participants with skills in leadership, facilitation, public speaking, coping techniques and conflict resolution.

The cohort of youth facilitators then goes on to lead a series of eight 90-minute workshops over the course of several months with a group of up to 30 adult educators. Workshop topics include Power and Privilege; Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Microaggressions; Student Voice; LGBTQ; Implicit Bias, Intersectionality and Cultural Differences. The methodology at the heart of the Diversity Talks professional development program is the PERM framework and assessment. The PERM framework was developed by the Diversity Talks team to measure the cultural competence of educators using four dimensions: Power, Empathy, Relationships and Mindset. The PERM framework explores the development of cultural competence through the lens of each dimension and across all four, highlighting the following foundational questions:

**P** **Power:** How do power dynamics among educators and youth affect youth empowerment?



**E** **Empathy:** How does the ability to empathize with youth from various backgrounds affect disciplinary actions?



**R** **Relationships:** How does strengthening youth-adult relationships affect the overall culture and climate within a school community?



**M** **Mindset:** How does the mindset of an educator shift when actively increasing cultural competency?



The PERM framework creates a schema for thinking about what it takes for individual educators, schools and school systems to create a culturally responsive educational environment. Within each dimension of the framework, the foundational question serves as an entry point for assessing the broader conditions needed to foster cultural competency. For example, analyzing the “Relationships” dimension starts with evaluating the quality and consistency of the relationships that exist between adult educators and youth within a school and assessing the impact on school climate. Since using the framework effectively also means looking across other dimensions at the conditions necessary for cultural competency to grow, it is equally important to consider the effect those relationships may be having (or failing to have) on progressive shifts in the power dynamics in classrooms (Power dimension) and the fairness and consistency of disciplinary actions (Empathy dimension) across school staff members. The PERM framework is designed to facilitate meaningful analysis of the interconnected factors that promote – or prevent – the creation of culturally responsive educational settings. In the summer of 2018, and throughout the 2018-2019 school year, Diversity Talks launched a round of youth facilitator fellowships and youth-led professional development workshops in three local education agencies (LEAs) in Rhode Island. Following the workshops, the Diversity Talks team coordinated a series of feedback forums to explore the impact of the experience on participating youth facilitators and adult educators and assess the potential for broader shifts in culture and climate at each LEA.

The forums included:



**Interviews with:**

- school and/or LEA administrators and other staff
- Diversity Talks program staff and leadership



**Focus groups with:**

- participating adult educators
- participating youth facilitators



**Pre- and Post-Program surveys for:**

- participating adult educators
- participating youth facilitators



**School climate data from the State Education Agency's annual survey**

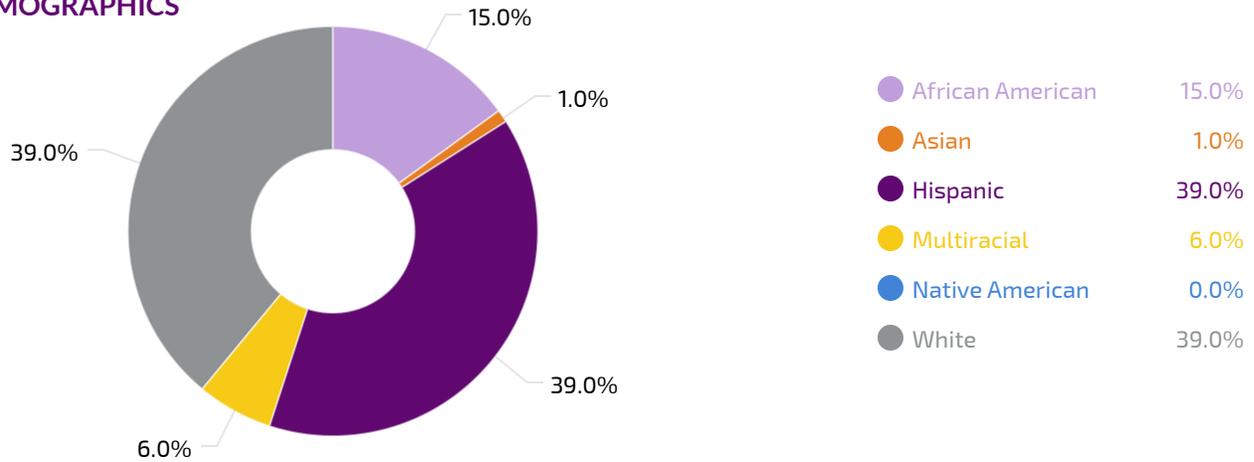
The surveys, interviews and focus groups were designed to align with the PERM framework, drawing insight within and across the four dimensions. The pre- and post-series survey questions probed basic evidence around each dimension and surfaced potential shifts in perception or mindset that occurred as a result of participating in the workshops. The focus groups and interviews also gathered evidence pertaining to each PERM framework dimension, with additional time for open conversations to probe consistencies or inconsistencies across dimensions and to elaborate on trends from survey analysis that required additional discussion.



# Background

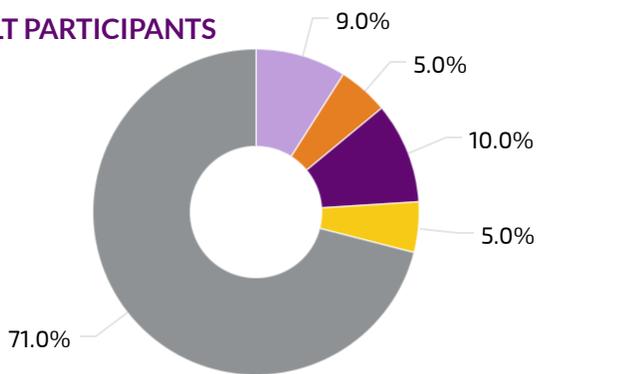
LEA #1 is a four-year comprehensive and career school that offers both academic and career-focused studies in grades 9 through 12. It serves approximately 850 students from across the state, with a staff of 85 teachers. Although it is located on a single high school campus, LEA # 1 is a state-operated local education agency governed by an independent, business-led Board of Trustees. The racial/ethnic population breakdown of the student population, based on data from the 2016-17 school year, is shown here.

## LEA #1 DEMOGRAPHICS

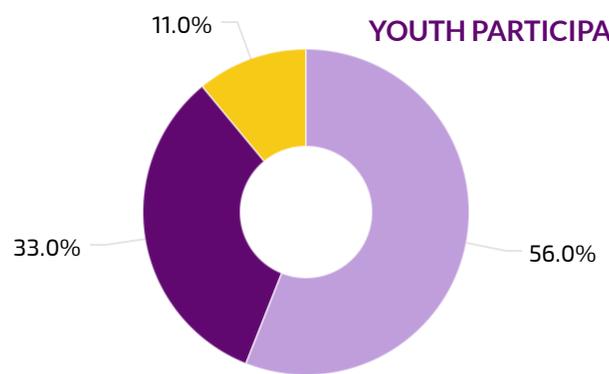


At LEA # 1, a group of teachers initiated the partnership with Diversity Talks and were ultimately able to secure a grant to fund the youth facilitator fellowships and youth-led professional development series. The educators who helped secure the grant felt that the topics covered in the Diversity Talks sessions could help the staff and students focus on improving school culture and provide some guidance around social and emotional learning. The youth facilitator fellowships launched in the summer of 2018 and included 11 participants. The adult educator cohort, which included the School Director, began the Diversity Talks workshop series with 22 participants in the fall of 2018 and concluded in January 2019.

## ADULT PARTICIPANTS

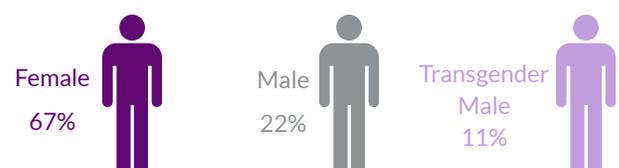


## YOUTH PARTICIPANTS



African American	9.0%	Asian	5.0%
Hispanic	10.0%	Multiracial	5.0%
Native American	0.0%	White	71.0%

African American	56.0%	Asian	0.0%
Hispanic	33.0%	Multiracial	11.0%
Native American	0.0%	White	0.0%





...it isn't always clear 'what to do with the diversity we have.'

During the focus groups with youth facilitators and adult educators, the discussions started with general perceptions about diversity, inclusivity and social dynamics. All participants acknowledged the racial and ethnic diversity of the student population, and many cited it as strength. Both youth and adult focus group respondents also indicated that the staff was less diverse than the student population. Adults rated LEA #1 as slightly more "inclusive" overall than youth participants, although youth participants had a generally positive view of inclusivity with respect to the availability of opportunities to participate in activities and coursework and the accessibility of resources, especially technology, to support learning.

When discussing social dynamics, while youth participants and school administrators acknowledged the positive impact of a growing visibility for LGBTQ students, youth participants articulated some nuanced social dynamics involving racial and

ethnic groups that adult educators were less cognizant of. One youth facilitator indicated that although the LEA is racially and ethnically diverse, it isn't always clear "what to do with the diversity we have". Other youth facilitators felt that although some social groups had racial diversity, there were also distinct cliques by race: "[There are some] white kids who only hang out with white kids, black kids who only hang out with other black kids". Youth facilitators had mixed feelings about whether or not adults knew about these social dynamics and wondered how, if at all, they would be able to control it if they were aware.

All participants described insensitive language in the hallways and common spaces as an ongoing issue. School administrators noted the need to address instances of "inappropriate use of racial slurs". Youth participants referred to some classmates as "ignorant" in their use of language and that some of their peers used jokes centered on race and ethnicity in a "messed up" way.



## Power: How do power dynamics among educators and youth affect youth empowerment?



The power dynamics that exist in most traditional educational settings between youth and adults tend to offer limited opportunities for anyone but the adult to lead the conversation, and even fewer opportunities for youth and adults to reflect on the impact of the power and privilege that different actors in a school setting hold. During the Diversity Talks workshops, both of those limitations are temporarily lifted as youth facilitators direct the learning and all participants are asked to confront their own power and/or powerlessness in the Power and Privilege workshop.

When prompted to reflect on their own perceptions about power and privilege after the workshops, adult participants from LEA#1 described coming to terms, in some cases for the first time, with privileges they had benefitted from that they weren't aware of.

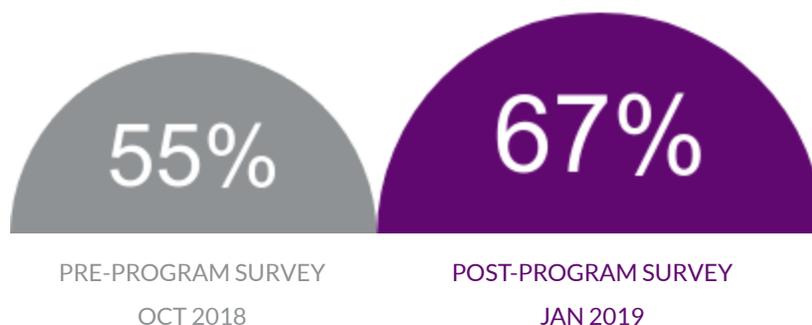


I didn't realize that part of my job is to be the voice for others.

One participant described recognizing a responsibility to use that privilege on behalf of students who don't have it: "I didn't realize that part of my job is to be the voice for others". Youth facilitators were aware of these realizations and encouraged by them. One facilitator remembered seeing "[one]teacher saying to another 'we have privilege?' they didn't even know. Now I think they are going to use that power and privilege to change things". Youth facilitators were also more cognizant of the power of their own voices after the workshops: "I think youth voice is more powerful than I used to. Now I think youth voice can really make a change". Another youth facilitator commented that after seeing how teachers in the workshops "actually listened [...] it made me want to speak out more. After [this program] I realize my voice has power". The survey results reflected an increased perception that student voices are heard in the classroom and community.

Although youth facilitators did feel empowered by having their voices play a more central role in leading the workshops, and the shift in roles seemed to elicit changes in perception for all participants, adult educators also expressed real concerns and some confusion about the broader implications of such a shift in a classroom setting. They indicated that they were impressed by the power and poise the youth facilitators demonstrated as discussion leaders in the workshop setting, but they were also uncertain about when/how to implement shifts in their power dynamics in their own classrooms: How much power can a teacher really give to students in a classroom? What will happen if the adult cedes 'too much' control? How should educators prepare students to take on a different role in their own learning if that dynamic shifts? Some expressed concerns about safety/classroom management (especially within career training courses), being personally called out by young people, and losing time for instruction.

**SURVEY QUESTION: I FEEL THAT THE VOICES OF STUDENTS ARE HEARD IN THE CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL COMMUNITY.**  
[YOUTH RESPONSES]



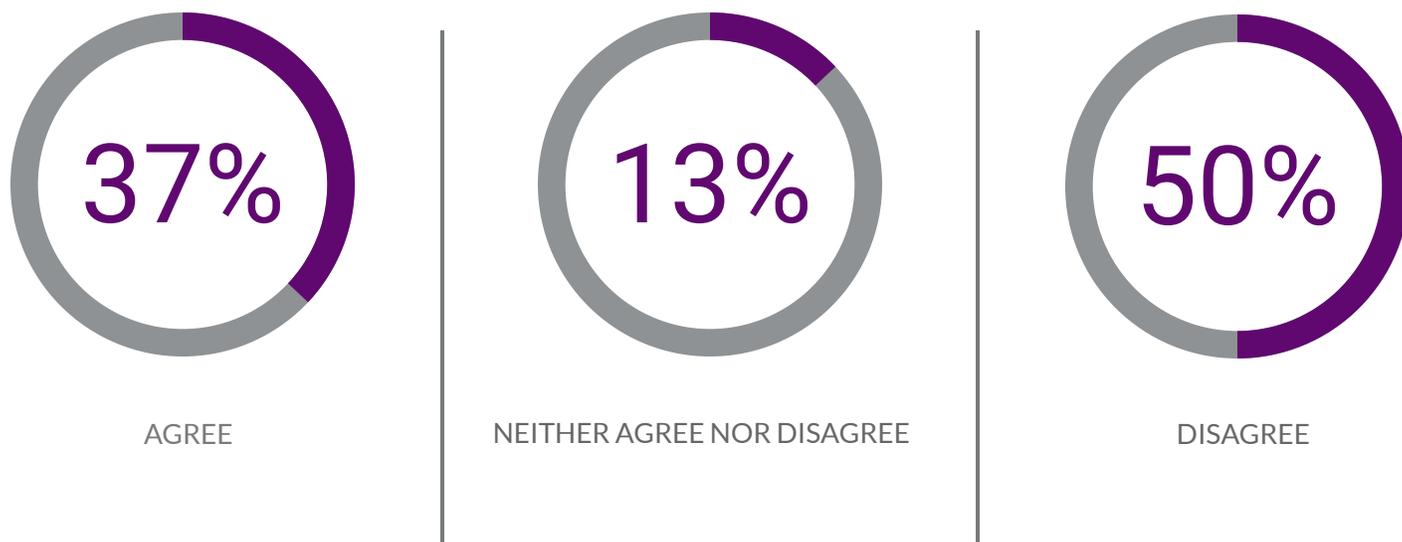
Despite these concerns, LEA#1 has begun laying the groundwork to create appropriate forums for youth to have their voices heard. For example, a student newspaper was recently established prior to the launch of the Diversity Talks workshops, and it has generated some excitement and ownership from students, especially as an avenue to amplify concerns and criticisms of the school. The School Director, aware of the discomfort this might cause for some, fully supports this endeavor as an opportunity to bring about lasting positive change in terms of students' experience and school culture overall. Although there is a need to support more of these shifts in classrooms, the school's initial effort could serve as an important lever for change, given the response of youth participants, some of whom still felt that 'student voice is less valued than teacher voice', as well as others whose mindsets shifted in their role as facilitators and were primed to take advantage of new opportunities to exercise the power their voices could have in the educational space.

## Empathy: How does the ability to empathize with youth from various backgrounds affect disciplinary actions?



In order to assess the impact of the workshop series through the Empathy dimension of the PERM framework, participants were first asked to share their general perspectives on disciplinary actions at LEA#1. At the school leadership level, although there was acknowledgement that recent aggregate disciplinary data didn't show problematic racial or ethnic discrepancies, the School Director saw room for improvement in the consistency of discipline referrals across all classrooms (this data point is tracked by the school, independently of state-mandated disciplinary reporting). Other school staff attributed classroom-level differences, which were also cited by some adult and youth participants in interviews and both the pre- and post- surveys, to the need to 'take things case by case' and 'acknowledge individual back stories.'

**SURVEY QUESTION: ALL STUDENTS ARE TALKED TO IN THE SAME MANNER AND HELD TO CONSISTENT STANDARDS OF BEHAVIOR [ALL RESPONDENTS]**



Youth facilitators had mixed interpretations of discipline practices across classrooms. Some attributed differences in applied disciplinary actions to bias about 'good students', others wondered if race might be a factor, while others observed that teachers weren't always conscious of the ways that 'trauma students have experienced' could affect their behavior.

The PERM framework foundational question in the "Empathy" dimension is focused on how the ability to empathize might impact disciplinary actions on the part of adult educators. Reflecting on their experience throughout the workshops, both adult participants and youth facilitators recognized the powerful impact of sharing personal experiences – particularly the impact of adult educators hearing their students' stories. Workshops that focused on Microaggressions, LGBTQ and

Power and Privilege were cited as being particularly impactful in this way. One adult participant remarked that "having the students really open up about their stories and about what happens to them in school and outside of school made me feel really connected to them". Youth facilitators and adult participants noted that there were tears at several of the workshops and one youth facilitator remarked that "when the teachers saw that all of us were crying, when they heard all of our stories, it really impacted them". Youth facilitators also felt that sharing personal stories allowed adults to have renewed understanding of youth experience: "a lot of teachers think we live in a fairy tale land because we are young [and that] we have perfect lives. When we went to Diversity Talks [teachers heard us talk] about how we struggle".

Although the possibility of increased empathy within the workshop setting was realized, the lasting impact on disciplinary actions, as well as the lasting impact on relationship-building, remains to be seen. Several adult participants expressed disappointment that the bonds established during the workshops – and the impressive level of candor and honesty the youth facilitators demonstrated – didn't appear to extend outside to the regular school day. This underscores how challenging it can be for schools to create ongoing opportunities to build and sustain empathy outside of controlled settings like the Diversity Talks workshops. Adult educators discussed some efforts the school had made to create regular space for this (including the structure of the school advisory period) but acknowledged it was hard to create the right conditions consistently in a school day filled with many competing priorities. Despite those competing priorities, continued attention to creating more opportunities to build empathy could play an important role not only in shaping disciplinary actions and ensuring a fair approach, but also in fostering an atmosphere of understanding and trust that acknowledges the real challenges both teachers and youth face in their lives at school and beyond.



## R Relationships: How does strengthening youth-adult relationships affect the overall culture and climate within a school community?



In the 2018 statewide school climate survey, 77% of students in LEA#1 responded favorably to the question “is there at least one teacher or other adult in your school you can talk to if you have a problem?” – a data point cited by school administrative staff in interviews as one they saw was particularly important. When asked about youth-adult relationships in focus groups and interviews, both adult and youth participants understood and acknowledged the importance of these relationships. More than one teacher cited an example of how their own teaching practice had significantly improved over time as they become more adept at establishing and focusing on relationships in the classroom.

In keeping with the climate survey data, youth facilitators could provide examples of “great relationships” they had with teachers and other school staff. However, there was also a sentiment

that some interactions lacked a level of mutual respect needed to foster a trusting relationship. “[Students] should treat ... teachers with respect but the same should go for teachers. [Sometimes] teachers seem to think that because they have a certificate, they can drag a student down.” Another youth facilitator gave an example of having faced some backlash after encouraging a member of the staff whom they felt could benefit from attending the Diversity Talks workshop series in order to build more positive relationships with youth.

Of the relationships that grew and evolved during throughout the Diversity Talks program implementation at LEA#1, the most compelling evidence of lasting relationship growth was within the youth facilitator cohort.



I assumed that other students didn't struggle as much as me but as we shared our experiences it really built trust.

Youth facilitators acknowledged the strong bond that was formed within the group as they shared personal stories and built trust: "I walked into Diversity Talks assuming I knew everything; I assumed that other students didn't struggle as much as me but as we shared our experiences it really built trust. When we cried in front of each other, it helped us be more vulnerable." They drew from the strength of that bond ("I don't think I could have spoken out [about these topics] alone- I tried to do this and it was too hard alone.") and agreed that it felt like one that would last: "this was a really impactful experience that we got to enjoy as a group...we're good friends now". The workshop setting proved to be slightly more challenging when it came to youth-adult relationships.

In the focus groups, some adult participants noted that they felt the need to 'censor' what they shared in particularly personal or intense discussions precisely because they did have preexisting relationships with the youth facilitators. This feeling of uncertainty - and hesitation about how to navigate a relationship with youth in the context of a different power dynamic - speaks to the complex challenges of relationship-building in educational contexts more broadly. The personal nature of the workshop discussions and the shifted power dynamic were new for all participants. As much as that newness and discomfort may be necessary to shift mindsets, it also proves particularly challenging for relationship-building between educators and youth in a limited series of workshops.



## Mindset: How does the mindset of an educator shift when actively increasing cultural competency?



Analyzing feedback from surveys and focus groups across the first three dimensions of the PERM framework, evidence of mindset shifts for participants at LEA#1 can be drawn out within and across the dimensions. For adults, key mindset shifts occurred around the privilege and implicit biases they bring to the classroom setting without realizing it. They also experienced mindset shifts of empathy, hearing youth - some of whom they had seen on a daily basis for years - share new insights about their cultural backgrounds and experiences outside of the classroom. For youth facilitators, learning the content to lead the workshops led to changes in mindset. As one youth

facilitator described the impact of participating: "My whole world view was changed. There were some things I was oblivious to and now I catch myself. I see other students do things I used to do and now I just glare at them." They also became more aware of the power their own voices could have in the educational environment. In fact, it was the positioning of youth voices at the center of the workshops that seemed to play the biggest role in changing mindsets for everyone involved. Youth facilitators were struck by the power of having their voices listened to and valued, while adults were struck by insights from the personal stories and experiences that were shared.



"My whole worldview was changed. There were some things I was oblivious to and now I catch myself."

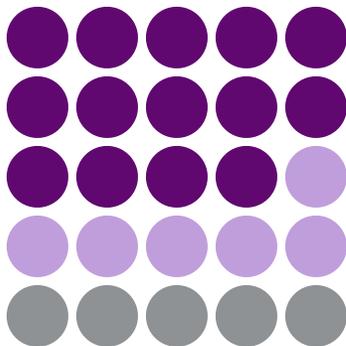
# Participant input on increasing diversity, equity and inclusion

When asked what advice they would give adult educators to make their schools more diverse, inclusive and equitable in the post-workshop survey, youth facilitators had a number of suggestions that exemplify key themes that arose during the sessions. A number of youth facilitators stressed the importance of school staff and leaders being open-minded and continuing to focus on listening to students' experiences. One youth facilitator noted they don't expect educators to "try and change everything... just [understand how students'] experiences can be so different" from their own. There was also interest expressed in creating more forums for youth to open up about their experiences beyond just the classroom, based on the positive impact of sharing stories in the workshops, including expanding opportunities to talk to mental health professionals at school, which were not always as accessible as they would like. Finally, youth facilitators expressed hope that adult educators who participated in the workshops would continue to share the collective lessons learned more broadly in the school.

When asked what supports or resources they would need to implement some of the changes that arose from workshop discussions, adult participants acknowledged the importance of continued access to youth input. One teacher said: "I want students to find their voices so I can be educated about their needs as well". Another said: "I want to hear from my students about the experiences they've had and the ways in which I can better support and empower them". They also emphasized how important it was to establish broader support for the work across the school.

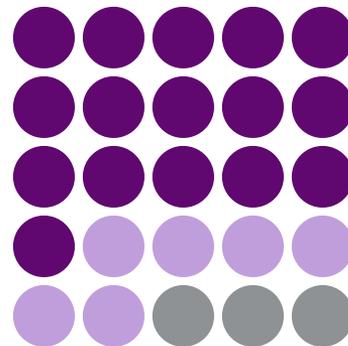
Although there was evidence of support by school leadership, a need for more staff to buy in to the work was acknowledged: "This was a wonderful opportunity and the school as a whole needs to implement some practices in every classroom. Support is needed to continue this work in the upcoming years". Teachers also expressed a need to have curriculum materials that could support culturally responsive instruction in the classroom ("I think departments should have time to look at curricula in light of these important questions about inclusion. Aside from our personal commitment to diversity and inclusion, we are going to be guided and limited by the curricula that we are required to teach.") and support from a professional learning community (opportunities to model, observe other classrooms and discuss with colleagues). As part of the post-workshop survey, adult participants also reflected on the changes they wanted to make to their own practice as a result of participation. Ideas about changing classrooms ranged from simple practices to build relationships ("[I want to be sure to] greet and say goodbye to students as they enter/leave classroom") and incorporating more classroom discussion, to a desire for more comprehensive resources and curriculum materials to better embed the work on a daily basis. Educators also expressed a desire to continue to be reflective about potential biases - their own and others - and be more aware of use of language in the classroom. Finally, many adult respondents hoped to continue to use student voice as a lever in their classrooms through student-led discussions and coursework, but also as a means of continuing to share their identities.

## ADULT PARTICIPANTS

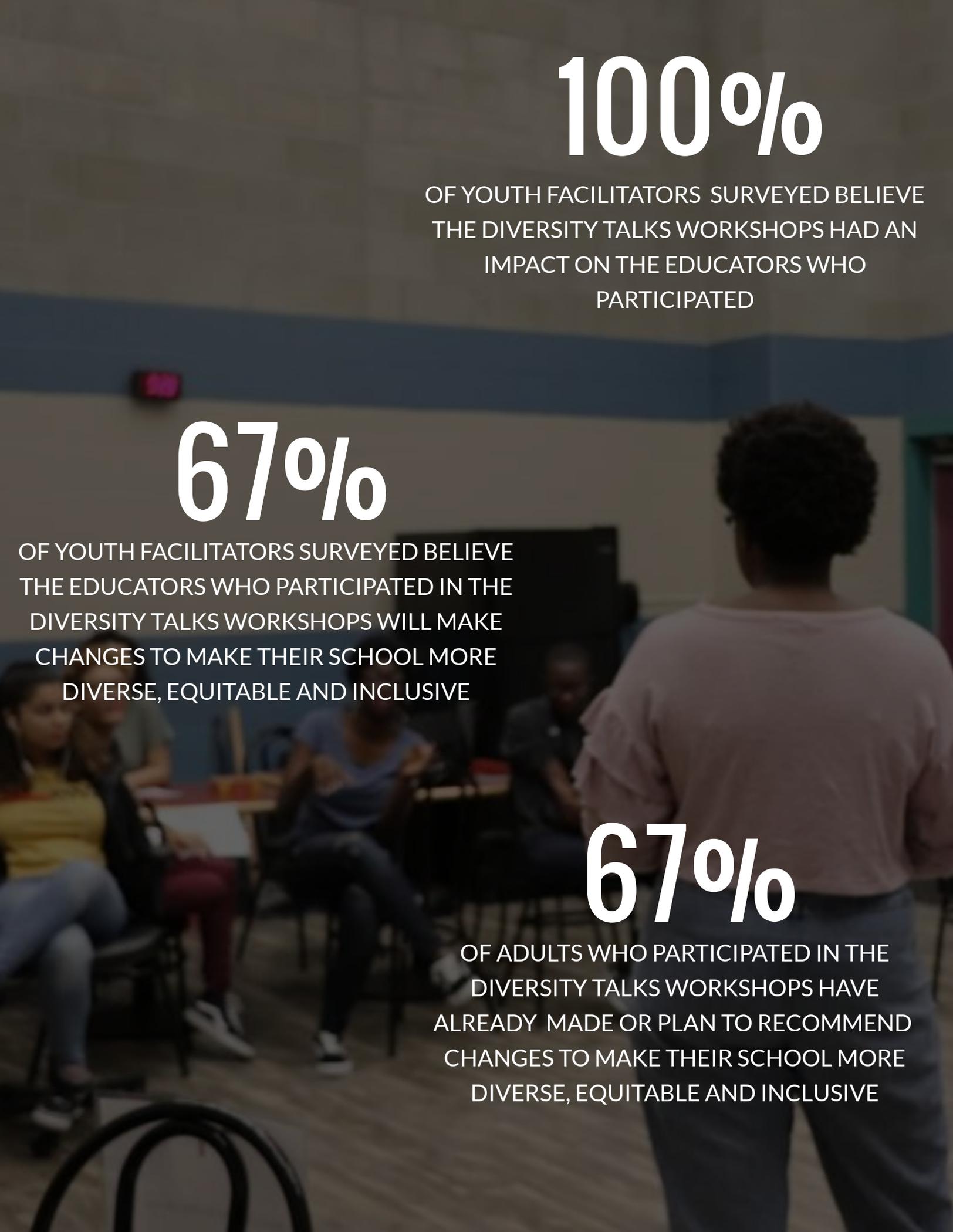


57% OF ADULTS REPORTED THAT THEY HAVE ALREADY MADE CHANGES TO THEIR PRACTICE AS A RESULT OF PARTICIPATING IN THE WORKSHOPS;  
24% PLAN TO MAKE CHANGES;  
WHILE 19% ARE UNSURE

## YOUTH PARTICIPANTS



67% OF YOUTH REPORTED THAT THEY HAVE ALREADY MADE CHANGES TO THEIR BEHAVIOR AS A RESULT OF PARTICIPATING IN THE WORKSHOPS;  
22% PLAN TO MAKE CHANGES;  
WHILE 11% ARE UNSURE



# 100%

OF YOUTH FACILITATORS SURVEYED BELIEVE  
THE DIVERSITY TALKS WORKSHOPS HAD AN  
IMPACT ON THE EDUCATORS WHO  
PARTICIPATED

# 67%

OF YOUTH FACILITATORS SURVEYED BELIEVE  
THE EDUCATORS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE  
DIVERSITY TALKS WORKSHOPS WILL MAKE  
CHANGES TO MAKE THEIR SCHOOL MORE  
DIVERSE, EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE

# 67%

OF ADULTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE  
DIVERSITY TALKS WORKSHOPS HAVE  
ALREADY MADE OR PLAN TO RECOMMEND  
CHANGES TO MAKE THEIR SCHOOL MORE  
DIVERSE, EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE

# Recommended Next Steps

Individual educators and youth facilitators who participated in the workshops had many powerful ideas to change their own behavior. Below are some broader recommendations for LEA #1 to continue advance in this work:



## **Focus on increasing youth voice in the classroom, and ensure teachers have the right guidance to engage.**

While increasing student voice has already been a focus at the school-level, LEA#1 should also encourage and equip teachers to change the power dynamic in their classrooms using student voice as a driver. Some adult participants have continued to work with Diversity Talks in a classroom-based coaching model where they will focus on this. The experiences of these educators may be used to guide practice for others and serve as a model. Furthermore, school leaders and teachers should work collaboratively to challenge assumptions on the part of some educators that giving student voice more power poses more of a risk than a benefit. Effort should be made to discuss real concerns about making time for this without losing classroom instructional time needed for other things, effective responses to student opinions that may be critical/negative of the school, and methods to ensure students respect each other's viewpoints and values when given space to talk.

## **Ensure that adult educators and youth facilitators have access to curriculum materials that help support/extend this work.**

Individual mindset shifts have been an important outcome of the workshops, but in order to embed the cultural responsiveness and competency in daily classroom practice, educators need to be equipped with resources and materials to make this possible. As with any broader systemic shift in schools, it should be as easy as possible for educators to find the right materials to make change in their classroom. As LEA#1 continues to engage in this work, a focus on finding texts, resources and guidance for practice that educators can use in their classrooms will help ensure that the school continues to become a more culturally responsive environment.



## **Continue to engage in deliberate conversations that build cultural competency for adults and youth.**

In post-workshop surveys, both adults and youth facilitators pushed for more members of the school community – adults and youth – to have the opportunity to participate in another round of Diversity Talks workshops. Whether they achieve these discussions through Diversity Talks or other means, there is value in continuing to grow awareness around the workshop topics themselves to change mindsets. Continuing the work will involve pushing through resistance outside the initial cohort of adult participants. School leadership noted that although there are educators who see the merit in difficult conversations, there are also some who aren't clear on the value of the work. While working to engage those who are resistant, LEA#1 will also need to ensure that the focus does not become solely a student-centered learning opportunity. Although adult participants and youth facilitators in the first cohort cited a need for more students to have the opportunity to engage in the conversations the workshops explored, educators must also continue to be engaged as learners as well. Ultimately, the entire school community should be encouraged to strive for shifts in power dynamics within the school setting to lift up and empower student voice, increase empathy, and create even stronger youth-adult relationships.



# DIVERSITY TALKS

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