



**aspirations
incubator**

2017-2023 FINAL EVALUATION REPORT





This report was developed for the Rural Futures Fund by the Data Innovation Project, which is part of the Catherine Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy at the University of Southern Maine.

Portland, Maine, May 2024.

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DIP Research Disclosure Statement

The Data Innovation Project recognizes that the study of the social realm can never be truly neutral and that as applied researchers our specific positionalities in social strata may influence our experience and interpretation of reality as well as our approach to understanding reality. For this reason, we believe it is our responsibility to be transparent about who we are as meaning makers and producers of knowledge. We are a team of educated middle-class, White professionals. Nevertheless, we strive to mitigate our biases through continuing education, reflection and self-work, and our study approach and design. If you believe we have overlooked a critical perspective or interpretation in our work, however, we invite you to let us know so that we may address it.

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Executive Summary

The Pilot: Investing in Rural Maine Youth

In 2017, the Rural Futures Fund announced the Aspirations Incubator (AI) six-year pilot initiative. The Aspirations Incubator is a long-term, youth development program focused on raising aspirations by increasing resiliency for students growing up in rural Maine, connecting students with their communities, and introducing them to new opportunities that exist outside the focus of their everyday lives. RFF worked with a carefully selected group of rural youth development organizations to build their capacity to implement the AI model. These AI partner organizations were tasked with developing comprehensive mentoring-based programming for youth starting in Grade 7 and continuing through high school graduation. All programming was guided by the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, and was designed to offer young people the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships through long-term mentorship and being connected with a community.

Purpose of This Report

The Rural Futures Fund engaged the Data Innovation Project (DIP) at the Catherine Cutler Institute of Health and Social Policy at the University of Southern Maine to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year evaluation of the Aspirations Incubator (AI) initiative. This Final Evaluation Report shares the most salient results observed from six years of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot program (September 2017 to August 2023) in five rural Maine communities.

What Students Gained from the Aspirations Incubator

Student data revealed positive changes in various areas throughout the program. The relationships students built through their AI program kept them engaged in the program over time, contributed to their sense of belonging, and laid the groundwork for them to explore their interests and make post-secondary plans. Most students noted some type of positive social or emotional change resulting from their AI program participation. Students also reported that their AI program helped expose them to new experiences and places, helped them get more engaged in their communities, and take on greater levels of leadership. This increased exposure to new experiences, which included college and career exploration, expanded students' ideas of what was possible for their lives, and inspired them to pursue different or more ambitious post-secondary plans.



Relationships and Belonging

Students felt like they belonged to something meaningful and mattered to their community.

- ▶ Students felt “at home” in their AI program. It became a safe environment where they could find support from trusted adults, make new friends, and ultimately build substantial and long-lasting relationships.
- ▶ When compared to all Maine students at the same grade level, AI students reported consistently higher rates of agreement with the statement “I feel like I matter to the people in my community” at 8th, 10th, and 12th grade. In 2023, 93.8% of AI students in 12th grade reported that they felt like they mattered to people in their community, compared to just 52% of 12th graders across the state.²



Social and Emotional Growth

Students learned emotional regulation and saw an increase in assertiveness and optimism.

- ▶ Students became more resilient; they developed the ability to self-reflect and regulate their emotions.
- ▶ Students reported significant increases, on average, in their assertiveness and optimism.



Leadership and Community Engagement

Students took on leadership roles in their communities.

- ▶ Many students said their AI program helped them learn how to be an engaged community member and most reported that they are more open to new cultures and people.



Learning and School Engagement

Students increased their attendance and academic achievement.

- ▶ On average, AI students scored better in English and Math exams in 11th grade than their peers.
- ▶ They were also less likely to be chronically absent compared to their peers.



Expanded Horizons

Students navigated the unknown and broadened their possible pathways after high school.

- ▶ Despite the challenges of COVID-19, going on educational expeditions was one of the program components that stood out most for students. Expeditions helped students engage in novel experiences and expanded their sense of possibility after high school.



College and Career Aspirations

Participation influenced future plans and college enrollment.

- ▶ 72% of 12th graders shared that participating in their AI program had either quite a bit or a great deal of influence on their future plans.
- ▶ As of June 2023, 89% of AI students who had just graduated were planning to go to college, and 74% enrolled in college in fall 2023.
- ▶ At most sites, college enrollment for AI students was higher than the program's local high school. The high rate of college enrollment is particularly striking given that Maine's college enrollment rates dropped substantially from 2019 to 2021, when the enrollment rate was just 52.7% overall and even lower for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.³



What Makes the Aspirations Incubator Model Work

Reflections from program managers and site leadership over the six-year pilot provided insight into the foundation of the Aspirations Incubator model and identified key building blocks for ensuring strong program implementation. These key building blocks are the core competencies and capacities that future organizations looking to adopt this model should have or be prepared to develop before and during program implementation. When executed well, these key organizational elements created the necessary conditions for students' positive experiences and outcomes.



Adaptability to Different Contexts

Program staff and organizations set themselves up for success when they leaned into the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles as a flexible guide to developing their AI program. The flexibility of the model allowed site staff and leadership to develop an AI program tailored to their unique organizational and community context.



Connections to Schools

A positive, collaborative, and trusting relationship between the site and its partner school was essential. While it helped when sites had preexisting relationships with schools, all sites found success when they maintained or developed their relationship with district administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors. Sites achieved a trusting relationship through investing significant time in listening to the needs of the schools and being transparent about what their program could offer. When programs had strong relationships with schools, it positively impacted all aspects of program implementation: programs could more effectively build relationships with students, recruit students to apply to the program, provide effective wraparound support and advocacy for students, and be a trusted partner and resource for school staff.



Program Integration and Organizational Buy-in

Implementation was easier for programs when sites fully integrated the AI program into their organization. In practice, this meant the AI program had dedicated staff, was compatible with the site's organizational infrastructure and philosophy, and the site could clearly articulate how the AI program contributed to its overall mission within the context of its larger organization. Some capacities stood out as particularly helpful for facilitating integration, these included: the full support of governing boards and the engagement of site leadership; structures to hire, train, and retain skilled staff; the ability to use or expand existing infrastructure (i.e., transportation and outdoor gear); the integration of the AI model into the organization's operations and mission; and securing funding to deliver on the long-term commitment to the AI model.



Organizational Agility

A site's ability to accommodate and adapt to the needs of their AI program also impacted the ease of implementation and student outcomes. This is illustrated in how organizations had to shift risk management practices to accommodate program designs and activities rooted in the Trekkers Principles. The changes included creating new internal policies around social media guidelines so that program managers could coordinate with students outside of core program activities, allowing program managers to drive students in their personal vehicles, and changing limits on the number of students permitted to go on an outdoor overnight trip. The importance of these adaptations was affirmed in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic when program managers were able to maintain connection to their students during school lockdowns, and organizations quickly pivoted to attending to the fundamental needs of their students and families.

Key Takeaways

The evaluation's findings around student outcomes and the critical elements of the AI model revealed several lessons learned and important takeaways from the Aspirations Incubator pilot. These key findings have implications beyond the scope of this pilot and may have value to the broader field of positive youth development, philanthropy, and policy in Maine and beyond.



The AI Model Supports Students at Several Levels

The AI model and the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles encourage a youth development approach that employs customized strategies rooted in a thorough comprehension of each student's specific lived experience, strengths, and challenges. While not exclusively structured around the social ecological framework, the AI principles nevertheless guided programs and staff to understand and support their students at several levels: at the individual, interpersonal, and community levels. This is noteworthy because prevention and intervention programs have been shown to be more effective when they are designed to act across multiple social ecological levels.⁴



Relationships are Both a Tool and an Outcome

In this program model, positive relationships function as both the vehicle by which outcomes occur, and an important outcome itself. When students develop and maintain strong and consistent relationships with their program manager and their peers over time, they feel safe. This sense of

security is a necessary precondition for students to open up, feel greater confidence in themselves, and ultimately become active participants in planning their future. The practice of “looping” – where adult and older peer mentors work with a dedicated group of program participants from the start and stay with the group throughout the course of the program experience – allows for deeper and more meaningful relationships to develop over the years.

Many youth-serving organizations focus on getting young people involved in a type of activity or experience — outdoor adventure, non-electronic games, expeditionary learning, or college-readiness. In a relationship-centered model, those activities are just the vehicle through which young people, their mentors, and peers develop an authentic, meaningful, and long-lasting relationship. Honoring this insight requires a theoretical and philosophical restructuring for any organization, program, or funder interested in this type of comprehensive mentoring and youth development.



Long-Term Engagement Values Depth Over Breadth

The AI model is a long-term intervention that follows participants from 7th grade through their graduation or departure from high school. This structure calls for a shift away from the common philanthropic goal of reaching as many people as possible and requires funders and organizations to see value in having a deeper impact on fewer people.

The most prominent impacts of this model are twofold. Long-term engagement fosters belonging. When compared to their peers across Maine, Cohort 1 reported feeling that they matter to the people in their community at a higher percentage than students in the same grade. This has great implications for rural Maine students who have disproportionately lower rates of feeling they matter to their communities.

Long-term engagement also sustains aspirations. Cohort 1’s college-going aspirations were high at the end of middle school, dropped substantially by 10th grade, yet returned to the 8th grade level by 12th grade. The AI programs helped students feel continuity and support through major transitions including from middle to high school and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.



Involving Families and Caregivers Promotes Equity

AI programs serve rural communities where students have fewer opportunities for afterschool programs that offer mentorship. While the pilot included family engagement from the start, over time its importance became evident, and a new principle, Fostering Mutual Trust Between Families and Program Staff, was added to recognize the critical importance of family engagement. A stronger emphasis on building relationships with caregivers lowered barriers for students to enroll and stay in the program. These efforts included offering the program at reduced or no cost, using different outreach methods tailored to the preferences of families, and individual family outreach and support to keep students and their parents/caregivers connected to resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Intentionally engaging families during the AI pilot contributed to the program’s ability to meet students where they were, lowered the barrier to enrollment in the program, and maintained student participation throughout the challenges and transitions they encountered between 7th and 12th grade.



Funding a Long-Term Model Can Be Sustainable

Although this evaluation did not include a return-on-investment analysis, financial data provided by the RFF did reveal some insights on the cost of funding long-term models. The average annual cost per program was \$151,676, which covered all the direct and indirect costs of running six cohorts of 10–20 students at once. Accounting for fluctuations in cohort enrollment, the average annual cost per student was \$2,002.

For comparison, the average cost per child in an afterschool program is \$100 a week.⁵ In Maine there are about 36 weeks in a school year, making the annual cost approximately \$3,600; more than the year-round cost of an AI program. Several site staff and leadership also noted that the model is not particularly expensive and there are opportunities to distill the model further which would in turn reduce costs.

Implications of the Aspirations Incubator Pilot

Our findings suggest that the Aspirations Incubator helped students by improving and diversifying their supportive relationships, fostering social and emotional growth, increasing feelings of belonging and optimism, and ultimately increasing their aspirations and honing their post-secondary plans. The AI programs also exposed students to new ideas, people, cultures, and places which helped to expand what they thought was possible for them after high school.

The implications of these results suggest that to improve rural young people's lives through the vehicle of youth development interventions, youth-serving programs and organizations should consider making relationship building and community-building the core of their work. Centering the relationships of young people, their families, and their community will also require programs to maintain this work over longer periods of time. Moreover, this paradigm shift toward longer-term engagement and relationship building has broad implications for philanthropy and policymakers, since they must also see the value of investing in this deeper relational work.





Introduction

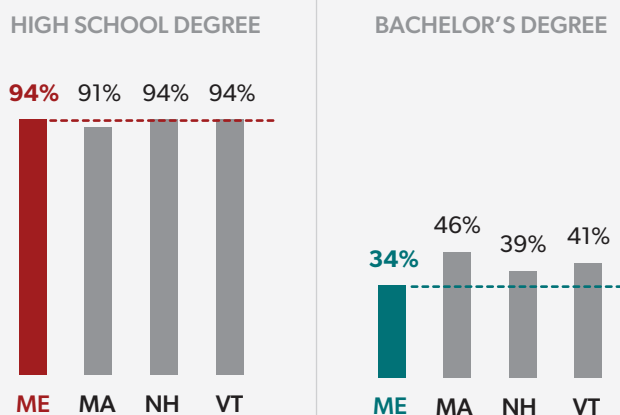
Maine's rural places are known for their bounty of natural resources, scenic woods and waters, and the tight-knit fabric of hardworking people dedicated to the future of their communities. Like other rural communities across the nation, these places face challenges related to geographic isolation and underinvestment. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, rural residents are contending with barriers to wellbeing that include educational loss, economic instability, and a continued lack of access to mental and behavioral health services.⁶

Investing in Maine's Rural Youth

Although nearly one in two students in Maine live in rural communities and 68% of Maine schools are rural, less than half of the state's education funds go to rural districts.⁷ Young people feel the impacts of these and other geographic inequities. Youth living in rural Maine experience poverty at higher rates than those in non-rural areas.⁸ Additionally, fewer young people in rural areas report feeling like they matter to people in their communities compared to their non-rural peers.⁹ While mobility and post-secondary aspirations can be seen as an opportunity to break these cycles, rural youth struggle to complete post-secondary education and training programs. Maine has a strong high school graduation rate, but only 34% of adults 25 years or older have completed a bachelor's degree – less than all other states in New England.¹⁰ More intentional and substantial investment in young people, starting at an early age, can begin to shift these patterns and has implications for the economic future of the state.

FIGURE 1.

While **Maine's High School Graduation rate is similar** to other New England states, **fewer adults in Maine completed a bachelor's degree**, 2018–2022.



Research shows that these investments in young people can help them develop the resilience needed to pursue pathways to a successful future beyond high school. Specifically, secure and supportive relationships with peers and adults outside of a student's family unit can buffer the impact of adversity, enhance resiliency, and allow young people to

direct their strengths toward academic success.¹¹

Programs that offer middle school students structured exploration and peer interaction and take advantage of their willingness to try new things can help them learn more about themselves and how they want to fit into the world around them.¹² There is enormous potential for these programs in many rural areas in Maine, where students do not typically have access to the resources that help them develop leadership skills and broaden their sense of what is possible for the future.

The Aspirations Incubator Initiative

In 2016, after six years of making grants to organizations throughout Maine, and following a year of research, planning, and partnership development, the Rural Futures Fund decided to focus its resources on raising the aspirations of middle school and high school students in rural Maine. In 2017, the Rural Futures Fund announced the Aspirations Incubator (AI), a six-year pilot initiative to build the capacity of a carefully selected group of rural youth development organizations. Aspirations Incubator partner organizations were tasked with developing comprehensive mentoring-based programming for youth starting in Grade 7 and continuing through high school graduation.

Each AI partner site worked closely with its local school district to meet the specific needs and interests of young people, providing year-round programming in small cohorts, focused on mentoring, experiential learning, social emotional development, and college and career readiness, including year-round opportunities for civic engagement, travel to other parts of Maine and New England, visits to college campuses, and outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, and canoeing. All programming focused on raising aspirations by increasing resiliency for students growing up in rural Maine, connecting students with their communities, and introducing them to new opportunities that exist outside of the focus of their everyday lives. A key element of each AI program included offering young people the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships through long-term mentorship and being part of a community.

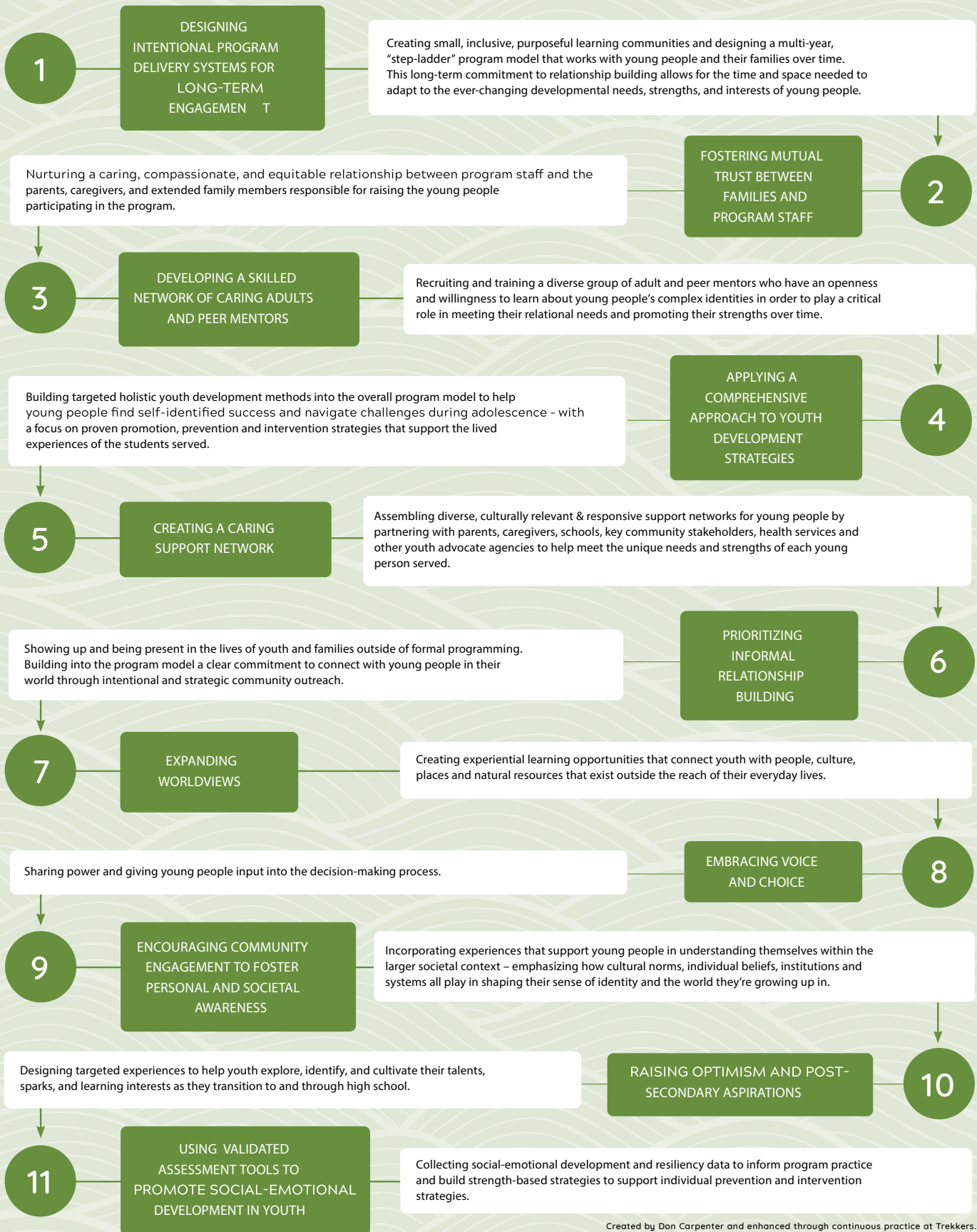


Background

The Model

The Aspirations Incubator was guided by the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles,¹³ developed by Don Carpenter, founder of the Trekkers model. Trekkers is a youth-serving organization based in Rockland, Maine. The Trekkers model is an evidence-informed long-term youth mentoring model that begins in 7th grade and lasts through 12th grade. Trekkers has made a difference in the lives of hundreds of students growing up in the small communities of Midcoast Maine by cultivating the inherent strengths of young people through the power of long-term mentoring relationships. The Trekkers Principles, displayed in the following graphic, are unique in their design because they focus on a continuous, long-term mentoring model that spans six years. The Rural Futures Fund selected Trekkers to be the model program for the Aspirations Incubator pilot based on its record of fostering a greater degree of positive outcomes for its students when compared to their peers, as well as the research which supports each of the Trekkers Principles.

TREKKERS YOUTH PROGRAMMING PRINCIPLES



Created by Don Carpenter and enhanced through continuous practice at Trekkers. COPYRIGHT © 2022 TREKKERS ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Aspiration Incubator Sites and Pilot Implementation Process

Once the Rural Futures Fund selected a youth program model to adapt in other rural communities, they conducted a search process to identify youth development organizations in rural Maine communities that were ready and willing to participate in a long-term program implementation process. The organizations selected through the search process each received a total grant commitment of \$600,000 over the six-year pilot, along with a commitment from the Rural Futures Fund to provide training, technical assistance, evaluation support, and coaching for the duration of the pilot. [Table 1](#) presents the Aspirations Incubator

grantee organizations that delivered programming for all six years of the Aspirations Incubator initiative. Although each organization had a background in serving youth and was required to partner with one school district for the grant application process, there were notable differences among the AI organizations. These site variations offered both challenges and opportunities when implementing the AI model and the Trekkers Principles.

After the final Aspirations Incubator site selection process was completed in Spring 2017, each site hired a full-time program manager, and those new program

TABLE 1. Aspirations Incubator Sites and Programs

Site	Program	Organization Mission	School District	Communities Served
Chewonki	Waypoint	A school and camp based in Wiscasset that inspires transformative growth, teaches appreciation and stewardship of the natural world, and challenges people to build thriving, sustainable communities throughout their lives.	RSU #1	Arrowsic, Bath, Woolwich, Phippsburg, and West Bath
Old Town-Orono YMCA	River Runners	A community centered organization that serves all ages by promoting healthy living, nurturing the potential of every individual and family, and fostering social responsibility.	RSU #34	Alton, Bradley, and Old Town
The EdGE Program of Maine Seacoast Mission	Journey	Through after-school, in-school, and summer programs, EdGE offers children the opportunity to challenge themselves, engage with their communities and the outdoors, and explore college and career options.	SAD #37	Addison, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Harrington, and Milbridge
The Game Loft	I Know ME	Promotes positive youth development through non-electronic games and community involvement.	RSU #3	Brooks, Freedom, Jackson, Knox, Liberty, Monroe, Montville, Thorndike, Troy, Unity, and Waldo
UMaine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond	NorthStar	Dedicated to helping young people reach their fullest potential through affordable hands-on learning in the outdoors, in the classroom, and beyond.	SAD #44	Andover, Bethel, Gilead, Greenwood, Newry, and Woodstock

staff came together for an intensive residential training experience at Trekkers Training Institute in Rockland, Maine, during Summer 2017. After learning together about the Trekkers Principles, and then seeing the Trekkers program practices in action over the course of the summer, each program manager developed a program design concept for a six-year, cohort-based mentoring program in their own community. Each new Aspirations Incubator program was designed to serve a small group of 10–20 participants, starting in 7th grade, and following them through 12th grade, providing opportunities for mentoring, experiential learning, social emotional skill development, and college/career readiness support. Each site added a new 7th grade cohort at the beginning of a new school year, so that at the completion of the pilot initiative in Summer 2023, each site had six cohorts in place.

While each Aspirations Incubator site was encouraged to incorporate the strengths and assets of their organizations and communities into the program design, they were also expected to maintain fidelity to the Trekkers Principles and were accountable for reaching certain program implementation benchmarks throughout the six-year pilot initiative, such as adding a new 7th grade cohort each year, maintaining a retention rate of at least 75%, reaching a ratio of three students to one mentor by the third year of the pilot, and allocating at least 20% of staff time to engaging in informal relationship building with participants outside of core program activities. The sites were also required to use data from validated assessment tools to inform individual intervention strategies and influence programming, as well as participate in the data collection process for the Data Innovation Project's independent evaluation. Rural Futures Fund staff provided technical assistance, additional training, capacity building, and coaching for program staff and organizational leadership throughout the course of the pilot.

The Aspirations Incubator pilot concluded in summer 2023, when the first cohort of students recruited in fall 2017 and recently graduated from high school, embarked on their post-secondary pathway as the first alumni of the Aspirations Incubator.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

In 2017, the Rural Futures Fund engaged the Data Innovation Project (DIP) at the Catherine Cutler Institute of Health and Social Policy at the University of Southern Maine to conduct a comprehensive, multi-year evaluation of the Aspirations Incubator (AI) Initiative. This Final Evaluation Report shares the most salient results observed from six years of implementing the Aspirations Incubator pilot program (September 2017 to August 2023) in five rural Maine communities. This report builds upon and reiterates some findings described in the Aspirations Incubator Interim Report published in 2021 which covered the first three years of implementation.¹⁴

The main goal of this final report on the Aspirations Incubator pilot is to examine its impact on students in key outcome areas: relationships, belonging, social and emotional growth, school engagement, and college and career aspirations. The report also discusses the foundations of successful AI implementation, what future programs need to make the model work, and the broader implications for rural youth development and post-secondary preparation.



Methods

The Aspirations Incubator pilot evaluation employed a longitudinal mixed methods design, which used qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the program's implementation and progress towards student outcomes. The evaluation was designed to both monitor the process of program implementation, including fidelity to the model, and employ a longitudinal time-series design that tracked individual student's responses over time. For longer-term student outcomes, secondary data sources were also used to draw comparisons between AI cohorts and aggregate peer statistics, such as school attendance rates, graduation rates and post-secondary initiation.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Implementation Questions

- Did fidelity to the model vary by site? To what extent did fidelity impact program outputs or observed outcomes?
- What critical program model elements or adaptations emerged over the course of implementation?
- What were the accomplishments and challenges experienced by the partner sites?
- What do future organizations need in terms of resources, capacity, and training to successfully replicate this program?

Outcome Questions

- Did the social and emotional well-being of students increase during program involvement? Specifically, did the program help youth improve in terms of the following:
 - › Exposure to diversity (people, perspectives, places)
 - › Awareness of post-secondary education and career options
 - › Social and emotional well-being
- Did AI student achievement and aspirations increase and/or maintain over the duration of the program? Specifically, did the program help youth improve in terms of the following:
 - › Enhanced school achievement and attendance
 - › High aspirations (maintained over time)

The Aspirations Incubator Interim Report (published in 2021) addressed the implementation evaluation questions and outlined preliminary evidence of student outcomes. It looked at progress towards fidelity targets and lessons learned around implementing the program, discussed successes and challenges sites experienced over the first three years of implementation, and began to distill the essential features of a successful program and conducive site organization.

This final evaluation report focuses primarily on the evaluation questions about student outcomes and continues the discussion around the critical elements of the model and necessary preconditions for organizations to launch a successful AI program. This report also describes broader lessons learned that may be relevant to the field and landscape of positive youth development in Maine and other rural states.

The following evaluation results are discussed in two main sections. First, we explore evidence of positive student outcomes at the conclusion of the six-year Aspirations Incubator pilot. In the second section, we discuss what arose as the essential elements for success when implementing this model of youth development. Though there have been many insights and lessons learned about implementing the AI model over six years, we have focused on highlighting elements that would be most relevant and applicable to a broad audience as the Rural Futures Fund and its partners move forward.



Data Collection and Analysis

The report synthesizes information gathered from the **following sources** starting in 2017 through 2023:

<p>Key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, various community stakeholders, and Rural Futures Fund program staff.</p>	<p>Semi-annual site reports through which sites reported counts on recruitment and enrollment, attendance, program activities, program development, outreach, and staffing.</p>	<p>Questionnaires on social-emotional development for children and adolescents developed by PEAR¹⁵ called the Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self-Change (HSA-RSC). The HSA-RSC is an end-of-the-year self-report questionnaire that assesses students' social-emotional development.</p>
<p>Site visits conducted at three sites in 2020 and 2023, which included student focus groups and site and program observations.</p>	<p>School attendance rates, as reported by partner schools.</p>	
	<p>Academic achievement scores on standardized tests.</p>	<p>Student experience survey after 8th, 10th, and 12th grades.</p>

TABLE 2. Data Collection Timeline and Sequence

	YEAR 1 2017–2018	YEAR 2 2018–2019	YEAR 3 2019–2020*	YEAR 4 2020–2021	YEAR 5 2021–2022	YEAR 6 2022–2023
Key informant interviews	●	●	●	●	●	●
Semi-annual site reports (2 per year)	●	●	●	●	●	●
HSA/HSA-RSC extract from PEAR	●	●	●	●	●	●
Student experience survey: 8th graders		●	●	●	●	●
Student experience survey: 10th graders				●	●	●
Student experience survey: 12th graders						●
Partner school attendance and achievement records				●	●	●
Site visits (3 sites): Focus groups and observations			●			●

*Start of COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown.

Table 2 (opposite) outlines the timeline and sequence of the six-year evaluation’s data collection. Note that the COVID-19 pandemic affected data collection and the evaluation results starting in Year 3.

Qualitative data were coded and analyzed using NVivo software; quantitative data were analyzed using MS Excel and SPSS to produce descriptive and inferential statistics. More information on the methods, data sources, and analysis can be found at the end of this report in [Appendix A: Methods and Data Sources](#).

The Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the Aspirations Incubator programs, their site organizations, their school partners, this evaluation study, and most critically, the AI students and their families. In the third year of the six-year pilot, AI programs, the Rural Futures Fund, and the evaluation team began to grapple with disruptions to every stratum of life and work. Below is an overview of how COVID-19 impacted program implementation and outcomes. The impact of the pandemic will also be highlighted at various points in the report where relevant, though this is by no means an exhaustive inventory.

Program Implementation

In terms of program implementation, enrolled cohorts were forced to pivot into online forms of connection through Zoom, FaceTime, Facebook groups, and Discord servers. Many program managers took on the new role of being informal case managers, working to connect students and their families with needed resources, delivering food and materials to families, and coordinating resources and supports with social service agencies. Some program managers also became liaisons between schools and the students and their families. The pandemic also undermined program managers’ capacity to recruit and enroll new students into their AI programs, and many said the cohorts they pulled together during 2020 and 2021 continued to struggle with group cohesion. Retention across cohorts suffered when programs could no longer entice students with novel experiences, such as overnight trips to other parts of the state and region, as well as

the economic instability that forced families to move out of sites’ service areas.

Program Outcomes

Given the substantial impact COVID-19 had on students and their families, as well as on how sites were able to implement their programs, it stands to reason student outcomes were also negatively impacted. Given what we know about how implementation was affected and COVID-19’s documented effect on school outcomes, such as attendance, we will highlight these issues and limitations as they arise in the report. However, it is challenging to isolate and measure how much these disruptions influenced our evaluation results. Nonetheless, we view maintenance over time as a successful result, knowing that many other students experienced declines in connection, engagement, and other aspects of well-being.^{16,17}





Who are the Aspirations Incubator Students?

Since its inception, AI sites have enrolled 518 youth, 390 of whom remained active by the conclusion of the pilot period (a 75% retention rate across all cohorts). AI participants hail from the communities listed in Table 1. They tended to enter the program with a mix of self-identified strengths and challenges and represent a range of family and socio-economic circumstances. Each year, students completed the Holistic Student Assessment, which identifies areas of strength and areas of challenge.ⁱ The strengths and challenges reported by participants help to identify the level of support they need, also called “Tiers;” Tier 1 participants are in need of low levels of support and Tier 3 are in need of high levels. At the start of the final year, most active participants were in Tier 2, needing a moderate level of support (44%), followed by Tier 1 (37%), and then Tier 3 (19%).

In addition, students participating in the AI programs in the final year across all cohorts and sites reported the following demographics.ⁱⁱ This demographic profile of AI participants has remained fairly consistent over the years, even as new cohorts have been added.

- 47% identified as girls and 46% as boys.
- 87% identified as White, and 4% as American Indian.
- 7% identified as African American, Asian, or Latino.
- 63% of Cohorts 1–5 who completed the student survey in 2022 and 2023, reported that someone in their immediate family (parent/legal guardian or sibling) had completed a two- or four-year college degree.

How are AI Participants Selected?

AI sites used a program selection approach that was specifically designed to enroll a wide range of students. Program Managers worked with school staff to identify potential students, sent home information about the program, distributed flyers, and held recruitment events. Program Managers often helped students and family members complete applications to increase accessibility and diversify their applicant pool. Once applications were closed, all AI sites, except for one, used some form of a lottery system by which to randomly select the final cohort of students. As programs experienced attrition, new students were added from program waitlists.

ⁱ The Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) is comprised of 41 to 61 questions spanning 14 scales and grouped into three areas of life skills. The HSA is also administered with a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 2005), which assesses positive and negative aspects of behavior and indicates whether additional interventions are needed. More information about the HSA can be found in the appendices of the Interim Report, located here: www.aspirationsincubator.org/the-results.

ⁱⁱ Some students chose not to answer, and some chose to self-identify.

Who are the AI Students?

PARTICIPATION

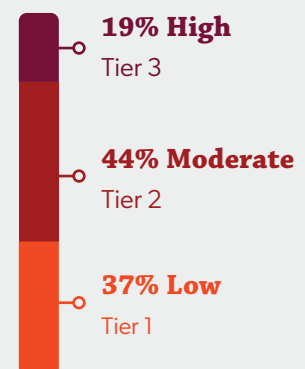
75% Retention



GEOGRAPHY



LEVELS OF SUPPORT NEEDED





What Students Gained

Student data revealed positive changes in various areas throughout the program. Their feedback consistently showed that the relationships students built through their AI program kept them coming back, contributed to their sense of belonging, and laid the groundwork for them to explore their interests and make post-secondary plans. Most students noted some type of positive social or emotional change resulting from their AI program participation. Students also reported that their AI program helped expose them to new experiences and places, helped them get more engaged in their communities, and take on greater levels of leadership. These new experiences, which included college and career exploration, expanded students' ideas of what was possible for their lives and inspired them to pursue different or more ambitious post-secondary plans.

KEY GROWTH AREAS



Relationships & Belonging

Students felt like they belonged to something meaningful and mattered to their community.

Page 24 →



Social & Emotional Growth

Students learned emotional regulation and saw an increase in assertiveness and optimism.

Page 28 →



Leadership & Community Engagement

Students took on leadership roles in their communities.

Page 30 →



Learning & School Engagement

Students increased their attendance and academic achievement.

Page 32 →



Expanded Horizons

Students navigated the unknown and broadened their possible pathways after high school.

Page 34 →



College & Career Aspirations

Participation influenced future plans and college enrollment.

Page 37 →

Relationships and Belonging

Many students described feeling comfortable and “at home” in their AI program. This appeared to be the result of the care program managers took to create an inclusive culture and safe environment in their cohort groups. The practice of “looping,”¹⁸ where youth development staff and mentors maintained continuous connections with the same group of young individuals over multiple years, created the continuity and support for AI students that helped to foster deeper relationships and nurture a sense of belonging. When program managers were asked what they thought the program means to their students, several described the impact of being a part of a caring group and feeling a sense of belonging. The word “family” was used numerous times throughout the six years to describe the cohorts’ cohesion. One program manager explained how students from one cohort considered their AI cohort a family, which showed that they were comfortable with the group, felt connected to it, and saw it as a second resource in their life.

“I feel like most of us feel like they are judged 24/7 and I feel like in this group I don’t feel judged, and I feel less anxious in this group.”

— 9TH GRADE STUDENT, 2020

When asked what kept them engaged and coming back over the years, 12th grade survey respondents and focus group participants overwhelmingly cited the people in their program – their friends, their mentors, and program managers. The relationships and the sense of belonging students felt also seemed to help them explore career opportunities and develop their own aspirations. One student explained their understanding of this connection, “[W]e can kind of hear what each other is into, which can open up ideas too.” Another student (10th grade) described the program as “a safe environment where I can learn and take steps into exploring my future career.” This further illustrates how positive relationships and environments are critical preconditions for increasing student aspirations.

Strong relationships with peers

From the first moment the evaluation team gathered feedback from students in 2019, they overwhelmingly shared stories about how the program helped them make new friends, make more friends, and feel a sense of belonging in their cohort. This theme held consistent throughout the six-year pilot. Each time the evaluation team surveyed a cohort in 8th grade they shared that their AI program helped them make more friends, connect with more people, and affected them positively.

Many students also shared that the program helped them expand and branch out of their initial friend groups or communities. One student from a focus group in 2020 reflected, “Before NorthStar I only had my group of friends, after that I learned I could be friends with other people.” Some programs recruited from multiple schools, which helped students expand beyond their school communities, while other programs attracted a cross-section of students within the schools, cutting across the groups that naturally develop during middle school.

The growth in peer relationships reported by students was reflected in the analysis of the HSA-RSC self-assessment. Among 78 students in Cohorts 1 and 2, 73% reported that because of the AI program, they were more likely to have positive relationships with peers by the time they were in 11th or 12th grade (Figure 2), and these peer relationships strengthened over time when compared to earlier self-assessments.

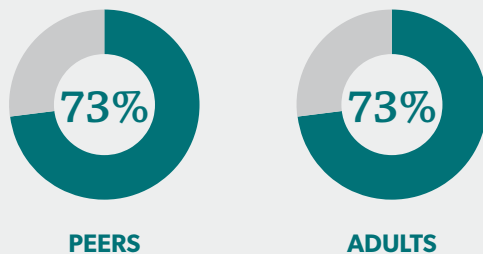
As students progressed through the program, they began commenting on the duration of their friendships in the group. Throughout the program, they developed “very important” relationships with their peers and these relationships provided a consistent community. In 2023, when reflecting on their experience with the program since the beginning, one 12th grade student explained how the program had affected them by “helping me get to know the people in 7th grade when we first began the program. Now these people are my closest friends, and I will probably keep in touch with them in the future.”



FIGURE 2.

In the final two years of high school, almost three-quarters of students expressed **positive growth in relationships** with both peers and adults because of the AI program, $n=78$

Students report growth in relationships with...



“I think part of the reason I feel this way about [the AI program] is the program leaders. [They] have helped me so much over these two years and I know I can always count on them.”

— 8TH GRADE STUDENT, 2023

Strong relationships with adults

The analysis of the HSA-RSC self-assessment also showed that almost three-quarters of students reported strengthened relationships with adults as a result of the program (Figure 2). Moreover, students at the four of the five sites reported a statistically significant increase in relationships with adults when compared to previous self-assessments.ⁱⁱⁱ

STUDENTS HAD THE STRONGEST ADULT RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR PROGRAM MANAGERS

Program managers were a positive and often stabilizing force in students’ lives. This has been a consistent theme across the surveys administered when each cohort was in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade. In 8th grade, students shared comments such as, “the leader is a super nice person” or that their program manager had helped them. By 10th and 12th grades, students began to identify their program managers as mentors, and see the consistent, deeper level of support they provided. One focus group participant illustrated this shift in thinking, “They [our program managers] are teaching you how to be a better human being. They’re mentors. They’re always there if you need anything.” In a different site’s focus group, one 11th grade participant described the lengths to which their program manager would go, “[Program manager] is an amazing person, she’s so willing to help people. She likes to go out of her way... [in] the middle of summer, she just picked [us] up and just went fishing and hung out. That was a good day.”

ⁱⁱⁱ One site, Journey, had difficulty recruiting adult mentors throughout the six years and were thus excluded from the comparison.



FIGURE 3.

A majority of 12th grade survey respondents plan to stay in touch with their program managers and adult or peer mentors after graduation, *n*=26

100%

PROGRAM MANAGERS

92%

PEER MENTORS

77%

ADULT VOLUNTEERS/
MENTORS

TEASING OUT THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORS VERSUS PROGRAM MANAGERS

The evaluation has often struggled to tease out how students conceptualize their program managers and how they were distinct from the other adult volunteer mentors AI students also interacted with through the programs. In focus groups in 2020, when participants were asked to discuss their relationships with their adult mentors, they immediately described the many ways their program manager had supported them. When pressed to speak to the other adult mentors, their feedback was mixed. Since 2020, programs focused on building out more robust mentoring in their program design, which led to more mentions of “mentors” from students in later surveys and focus groups. However, it was not always clear when a student mentioned their “mentor” if they meant their program manager or one of the other mentors supporting their program. Some sites also focused more on developing the peer mentor component of their program design when challenges with adult mentor recruitment emerged. Students at those sites built stronger relationships with older students from the AI program or from their broader community.

Nonetheless, 12th grade students shared that their program manager or mentor kept them coming back to the program. When asked about what kept them engaged over the years, one 12th grade student responded, “My program mentor. I love spending time with her.” Twelfth grade students were also asked to share who they plan to stay in contact with after completing the program and their responses begin to tease out some distinction between the various types of mentors that students engaged with. All respondents planned to stay in touch with their program manager, while 77% planned to stay in touch with an adult volunteer or mentor involved in their AI program (Figure 3).

Feeling a sense of belonging and community

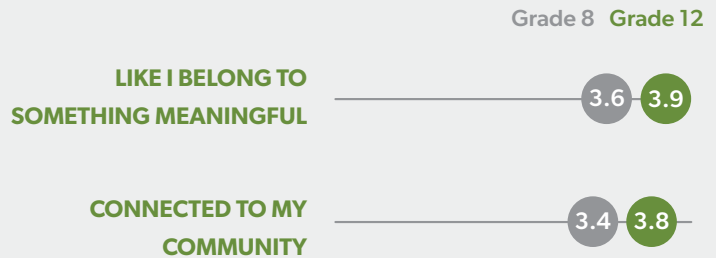
In one focus group, a student shared that their AI program is a “consistent community.” Others described their program as a home base where they feel comfortable being themselves. In the student survey, respondents of various ages shared comments about how the program made them feel more connected and have a sense of belonging with their group, and that this outcome was related to the increase in friendships they experienced. The students’ feedback was echoed in the matched comparison of the student survey from 8th to 12th grade. There was a significant increase in how much respondents agreed that the program had helped them feel connected to their community and feel like they belong to something meaningful (Figure 4). At 12th grade, 100% of Cohort 1 agreed that the program helped them feel like they belong to something meaningful, and 97% agreed that the program helped them feel connected to their community.

When compared to their younger selves Cohort 1 also experienced an increase in how much they felt they mattered to the people in their communities by 12th grade. Furthermore, when compared to all Maine students at the same grade level, as measured by the Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey,¹⁹ they reported consistently higher rates of agreement with the statement “I feel like I matter to the people in my community” at 8th, 10th, and 12th grade (Figure 5). Both Cohort 1 students and Maine students experienced a drop in feeling they matter to their community in 2021 at 10th grade, a drop that was likely exacerbated by the social isolation brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although both samples saw an increase in agreement by 2023, the difference is also most extreme by 12th grade; Cohort 1’s agreement is 41.8 percentage points higher than the statewide comparison.

FIGURE 4.

Survey respondents reported a **significant* change in how much the program helped them feel belonging and connection** from 8th to 12th grade, n=22

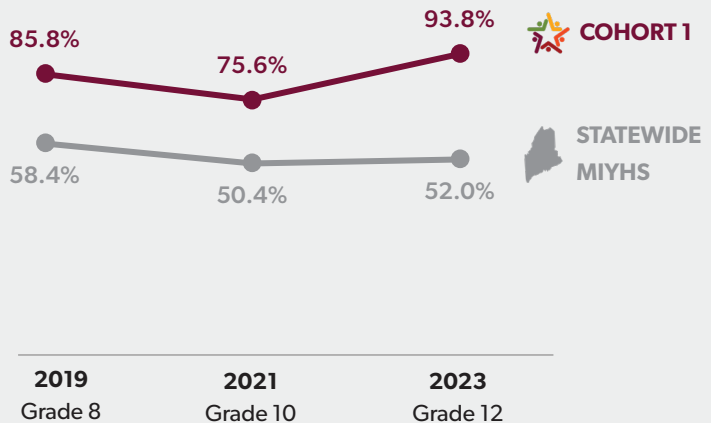
Being in this program has helped me feel...



*significant at the 0.05 alpha level. Out of a four-point scale.

FIGURE 5.

Cohort 1 reported **feeling that they matter to the people in their community at a higher percentage** than all students in the same grade across Maine, from 2019 to 2023 (Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS))



“It has helped me realize that I matter to everyone and that I can be myself and learn from my mistakes.”

— 8TH GRADE STUDENT, 2023

“...I was, like, a shy person when I started out, and then as the years went on, I just, you know, kind of grew out of that shell and got to make core memories and stuff with all these guys.”

— FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, 2023

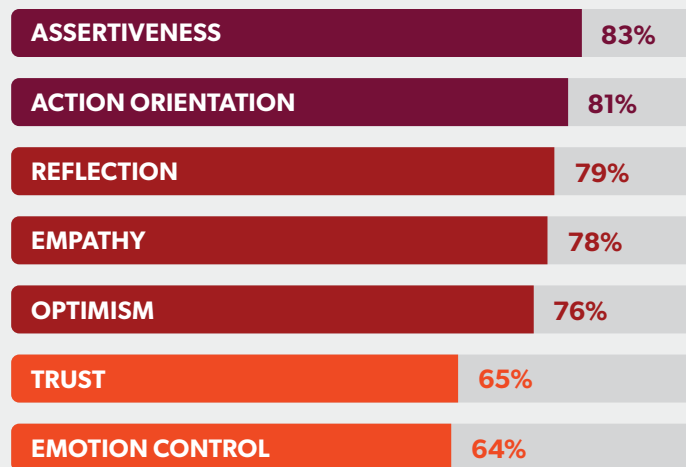
Social and Emotional Growth

A common theme across all student feedback was that the AI program helped students come “out of their shells” and be “more comfortable in their skin.”

In the 2023 focus groups, participants from grades 10–12 were invited to do an arts-based reflection exercise where they drew their journey through the program, from where they started to where they were at the time of the focus group. During this activity, more than half of the participants noted some kind of social or emotional change as a result of the program. These changes included being more open to try new things, being more outgoing, being less shy or more comfortable in social situations, feeling more level-headed and balanced, and feeling more emotionally regulated. One participant explained how they went from being “louder” to being more “mellow” and they attributed the change to the co-influence they had with their fellow cohort members. They said they helped their peers “open up” and their peers helped them “mellow out,” to which the other focus group participants nodded in agreement. Another participant said they went from being indoors looking at a screen most of the time to being out of their home and talking with others.

FIGURE 6.

In the final two years of high school, **a majority of students expressed positive growth in multiple resilience factors** because of the AI program, *n*=78



Many of the self-reported measures of resilience as defined by the HSA-RSC reflected these qualitative results (Figure 6). By 11th or 12th grades, most students in Cohorts 1 and 2 reported growth in the areas of assertiveness (being able to advocate for oneself), action orientation, reflection, empathy, and optimism. Interestingly, apart from action orientation and reflection, boys were more likely to report growth on these measures compared to girls.

Assertiveness

As noted in Figure 6, assertiveness is one of the key resilience areas in which students reported significant growth. The PEAR Institute defines assertiveness as “confidence in putting oneself forward, advancing personal beliefs, wishes or thoughts and in standing up for what one believes.”²⁰ This growth area was echoed in the student survey matched comparison, where students reported significant changes in learning how to make plans and carry them out and understanding their strengths and how to use them from 8th grade to 12th grade. Furthermore, across all years and grade levels, students consistently reported increased confidence resulting from participation in the program. In addition to confidence, students shared other facets of assertiveness, such as learning more effective communication, figuring out how to achieve their goals, and learning how to give feedback and believe that their input is valuable.

“This program has helped me grow as a person and made me much more confident in myself and my abilities.”

— 10TH GRADER, 2021

Optimism

When asked how the program had affected them, student survey respondents shared many examples of how they had a more positive outlook or view of themselves. The 12th grade students (n=32) were asked to respond to the statement “I feel optimistic about my future” to which 75% responded “that was very true for me” and 22% responded “that was sort of true for me.” This result was reinforced by some respondents’ comments, such as, “This program has helped me succeed in school and be excited about my future,” or from one 8th grade student, “It just made me feel better about life. Again, this was an area that showed statistically significant growth in the HSA-RSC self-assessment.

Reflection and emotion control

Although the domains of reflection and emotion control did not increase significantly when the HSA-RSC was compared over time, throughout the qualitative data, students shared feedback that still indicated some growth in these areas. In fact, most comments demonstrated respondents’ capacity to reflect on their growth, understand their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and develop a sense of personal identity. This capacity was seen as early as 8th grade, such as in this student’s comment, “I feel like being in this program has made me more understanding, intuitive, and empathetic.” As students grew older, there were more comments about students having a better understanding of themselves. Some students explained that through the program they had changed into what they deemed were better versions of themselves, someone they were proud of, or someone who had better “overall character.”

In terms of emotion control, respondents shared ways in which they developed better tolerance for distress or conflict with other people. One respondent said the program helped them learn how to control stressful situations, another said they learned “how to handle things better.” Many respondents also reported increases in pleasant emotions or states, such as being calmer or feeling happier.



Leadership and Community Engagement

Students' increased sense of connection to community was another key outcome of the Aspirations Incubator. While students in focus groups and in their survey responses did not always clarify if community referred to their cohort, school, or in the broader community in the place they lived, the importance of community was a consistent theme. Students and their program managers often referred to the importance of engaging with school and town communities through volunteering, school events, excursions, and other core elements of the AI program. No matter the exact group, students' time engaging with new communities taught them about how a healthy community functions and how to participate in one. Equipped with the skills they learned through the trusting relationships within their AI cohort, students began to conceptualize themselves as active participants with the power to positively influence their communities. Some students elevated their level of community engagement and took more responsibility for planning events or attending extra trainings to learn how to mentor younger cohorts. Thus, community engagement was an avenue through which students developed their own leadership skills within and beyond the AI program.

“This program has helped me become someone I am proud of, and I help others feel proud of themselves too.”

— 10TH GRADE STUDENT, 2021

Learning how to be an engaged community member

Students often reflected on how their AI program taught them new things about their own communities and helped them gain insight into how healthy communities operate. Through experiences like volunteering and going on excursions, students also learned that they could have a positive impact on the place they are from.

Program managers shared examples of taking students to volunteer with community organizations. In 2019, one site described how a cohort with students who were “jumpy and had a hard time focusing” did “an amazing job” while volunteering with the local land trust and fire department. This speaks to the impact of exposing students to new places within their community and giving them the opportunity to feel a sense of responsibility within a new environment. In surveys, students' responses demonstrate how these opportunities helped them see themselves as participants in their broader community. Students also noticed how community participation had a positive impact on their self-esteem by helping them be more aware of the people around them and realizing that they matter to other people. Volunteer opportunities stood out to one student in a focus group, who described how community service was a component of some cohort trips. This student shared “we enjoy helping the community” and clarified that students saw the connection between their volunteer actions and the broader impact on the place they are from.

Students also shared how exposure to new aspects of their community made them more aware of and open to different perspectives and people. In 2022, a 10th grade student reflected that their AI program exposed them to “different points of view.” In the same year, an 8th grade student shared, “I have met different people in our community that I would not have reached out to before this” and that this gave them a new outlook on their community. These responses demonstrate that exposure to new communities, whether an AI cohort, school, or group within a student's hometown, made students more comfortable with new ideas and people. Along the same line, one site reported encouraging their students to apply to paid community engagement opportunities through other organizations such as Inspire Girls, The Maine River Fund, and Outward Bound. The structured community service experiences within the AI program prepared students to explore more independent leadership opportunities tailored to their individual interests, skills, and strengths. These new experiences may also help students navigate new communities beyond high school.



Leading in the community

For some students, the lessons they learned about how to participate and take responsibility for their community motivated them to step up as leaders, although this looked different for each student. In 2020, two 8th graders shared in the student survey that the program affected them positively by teaching them how to be leaders: for one student this looked like gaining the trust of their peers; for another leadership was related to healthy problem solving.

Additionally, certain program elements were designed to encourage and build leadership skills. This focus often manifested in students working together to independently plan excursions. Through this process, students practiced decision-making and assertiveness. One site administrator discussed how students participated in the annual Rotary Club yard sale to raise money for their trip to a big city. During this event, he shared that “you could just tell that [the students] were very pleased with themselves and the ability that they had to work with each other.”

“The program has made me a better person. Helping out with community makes me feel like a better person.”

— 8TH GRADE STUDENT, 2020

Other students saw the positive impact of their own cohort groups, or the positive benefits of engaging with their school and broader community and sought out ways to give back. By the end of the program, students within all cohorts had the leadership opportunity to become peer mentors and some participated in various leadership trainings. In one AI program, peer mentors helped recruitment efforts by attending the Common Ground Fair with their program managers. Across many programs, peer mentors supported program managers with activities that included service work, peripheral programming,^{iv} assisting younger cohorts with trip planning, and

helping with family engagement dinners. Program managers shared that their students were enthusiastic about being peer mentors and saw it as an opportunity to contribute to a program that was meaningful in their own lives. One program manager shared that when she asked a student why they wanted to be a peer mentor, they responded: “I wanted to be more a part of a program I loved. [Being a mentor] means having more to do with something I enjoy and hopefully being someone people can look up to.”

Program managers shared examples of student leadership connected to and beyond students’ cohort communities. At one site, a group of 12th graders independently planned and executed a presentation of reflection and gratitude for the adult volunteer mentors who worked with them since the start of their time with the program. Other groups stepped up to make a positive change in their school communities. At another site, AI students joined the dress code committee and proposed changes to the administration, making their voices heard and addressing challenges they faced at school. Through their program’s connection with the school’s civil rights team, another group of students organized a sold-out, first-ever pride event in their community. This event was also a fundraiser, and students used the money they raised to bring an Indigenous leader to speak at their high school’s Day of Welcoming.

These examples illustrate how the AI program offers students structured ways of participating in a community and developing leadership skills. An outcome of the program was that some students took these opportunities further and used them to show gratitude, make change, and positively impact their broader communities.

^{iv} AI core programming is grade-based curriculum and trips/expeditions that are consistently offered to all incoming cohorts. Peripheral programming refers to planned activities with AI students that occur in addition to the core program, can be offered to students outside of the cohort, and are organized around student interests, enrichment opportunities, and/or just getting together as a group.

Learning and School Engagement

Overall, our evaluation findings suggest that participation in AI has positively influenced students’ engagement in school despite the significant disruption to their learning and school engagement stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, most students in Cohorts 1 and 2 who completed the HSA-RSC self-assessment reported growth in terms of learning and school engagement as result of participating in the Aspirations Incubator (Figure 7). This was particularly notable in the areas of critical thinking, learning interest and academic motivation. As we observed previously, the results varied by gender. Here, boys were more likely to report growth on the measures of critical thinking, perseverance, and academic motivation compared with girls. It is worth noting, however, that girls’ scores were generally higher to begin with. This is consistent with previous years’ findings.

FIGURE 7.

In the final two years of high school, **a majority of students expressed positive growth in several factors related to academic achievement** because of the AI program, *n*=78

CRITICAL THINKING

85%

LEARNING INTEREST

82%

ACADEMIC MOTIVATION

81%

PERSEVERANCE

76%

Increased school attendance and academic achievement

Starting in fall 2021, AI sites worked with their local schools to obtain data regarding attendance and academic achievement which were examined as an annual snapshot. Over time, a trend emerged: students participating in AI were more likely to attend school and more likely to meet or exceed expectations on academic assessments than other students in their grade who did not participate in the Aspirations Incubator. This was despite the persistent chronic absenteeism brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic which disrupted learning and often stifled academic achievement.²¹ While inconsistencies with what was reported across school districts each year preclude our ability to provide meaningful trending or comparative data, the overall pattern indicates that AI students were more engaged with school than their grade-level peers.^v A snapshot of 11th grade data from Cohorts 1 and 2 demonstrates this point.

In Spring 2022, Maine high schools conducted NWEA assessments²² for 11th grade students in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. Data were obtained from four of the five AI sites. As seen in Figure 8, AI participants from Cohort 1 were more likely to meet or exceed assessment standards when compared with their peers. Similarly, when pooling two years of data, AI participants in 11th grade at four of the five AI sites were less likely than their peers to miss 18 or more days of school (Figure 9).

A snapshot of 8th grade students from four of the five AI sites from the 2022–23 school year demonstrates a similar pattern, as shown in Figures 10 and 11.^{vi} Here, we can see that AI students in Cohort 5 were less likely than their peers to be chronically absent (missing 18 or more days per year), and more likely to exceed assessment standards when compared with their peers.

v Data from 2020–21 academic year, which saw the onset of the pandemic, were excluded from the study.

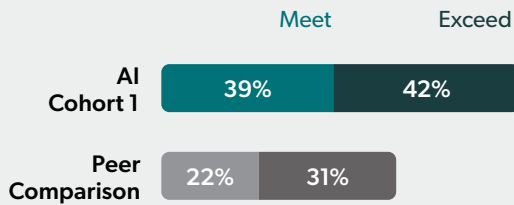
vi One AI site reported inconsistent data and was therefore excluded.

IN GRADE 11

FIGURE 8.

Students in Cohort 1 were **more likely to meet or exceed expectations** in English and Math than their peers, $n=33$

MATH



ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

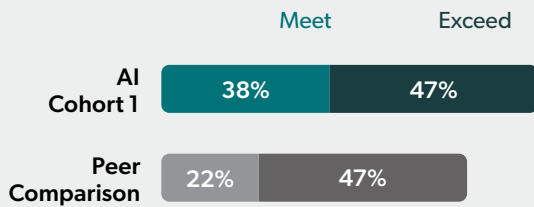
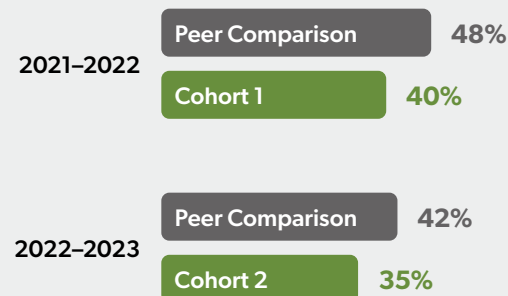


FIGURE 9.

Students in Cohorts 1 and 2 were **less likely to be chronically absent** (missing 18+ days) compared to their peers, $n= 79$

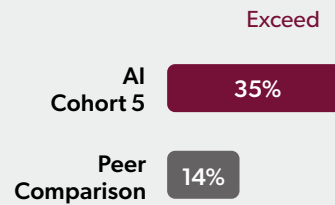


IN GRADE 8

FIGURE 10.

Students in Cohort 5 were **more likely to exceed expectations** in English and Math than their peers, $n=49$

MATH



ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

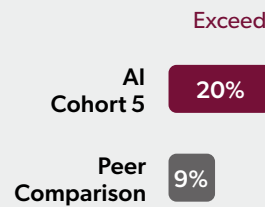
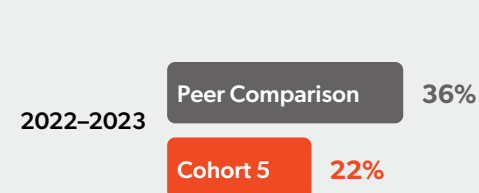


FIGURE 11.

Students in Cohort 5 were **less likely to be chronically absent** (missing 18+ days) compared to their peers, $n= 51$



Expanded Horizons

Exposure to new people and places were two core components of students' AI experiences and contributed to many students' expanded horizons and worldviews. Going on trips and excursions was an essential part of all site programming that stood out for students. In addition to relationships, students reported that the trips also kept them engaged in the program. Students learned camping and expedition skills when they participated in overnight camping trips around Maine; during local trips, they engaged in community service projects. To further broaden horizons, sites organized visits to college campuses, and trips to cities including Portland, Boston, New York City, Washington D.C., and Montreal.

Every site had to adapt the experiential learning components of their curriculum after the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020. For a period, all in-person excursions halted and instead programs focused on virtual formats. As in-person activities returned, programs had to be flexible to meet the COVID-19 guidelines and policies of their organization and/or school district. Instead of overnight trips, some programs offered outdoor excursions for one day. However, by the end of the six-year pilot, Cohorts 1 and 2 were able to go on more substantial out-of-state trips, and overnight trips for younger cohorts made their way back to the curriculum. While COVID-19 significantly disrupted this aspect of programming, the sites found ways to adapt to keep students engaged.

Despite COVID-19 interruptions, surveys, focus groups, and interviews consistently revealed that excursions were an important part of student growth and learning. Excursions to unfamiliar places and opportunities to make meaningful connections with new people boosted students' confidence, resilience, and inspired them to think about their future in new, expansive ways.

“Because of the trips, and the people, I keep coming back.”

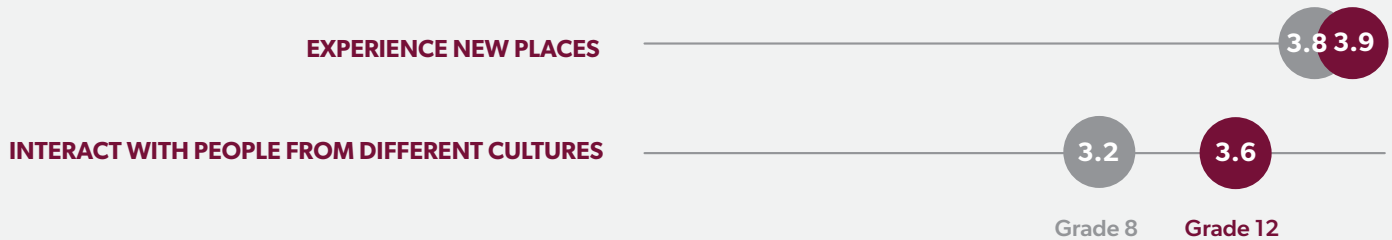
— STUDENT (2023 FOCUS GROUP)



FIGURE 12.

Survey respondents continued to experience new places and **reported significant** increases in exposure to people from different cultures** from 8th to 12th grade, $n=22$

At my program, my peers and I get to...



**significant at the 0.10 alpha level.

New experiences opened students' minds

Exposure to new places and people impacted students' comfort with the unknown; it made them more open to learning about the place they are from and about different communities and cultures. Hiking and camping trips were one common way that program managers challenged students to reach outside their comfort zone. During a focus group, one student shared that, even though they connected with the outdoors through Boy Scouts as a kid, participating in trips through their Aspirations Incubator program helped them enjoy and appreciate the outdoors in a new and deeper way. Another discussed that trips to new places in Maine helped them appreciate this "great state." Students frequently shared that they would not have known about certain places in Maine, such as Acadia National Park, without their AI program.

"This program has given me a fun way to get outside and to experience things in the community that I either wouldn't know about or wouldn't do normally."

— 8TH GRADE STUDENT, 2023

Expanding students' worldview also happened in more subtle ways. One program manager described her program as a "lifeline" for her students to "travel" and "get involved in different things" because "they don't have a lot else going on." Students shared that their program pushed them outside their comfort zone by getting them to learn about new people and places

— even ones close by. In the student survey, one 10th grader shared that their AI program helped them open up to their peers and community and explore different cultures, and that the overall effect of this was to make them a more open, friendlier person. This reciprocal relationship between an expanded worldview and social and emotional growth was a theme throughout the survey responses. Students also made the connection between making new friends, expanding boundaries, and visiting colleges which helped them imagine new post-secondary pathways.

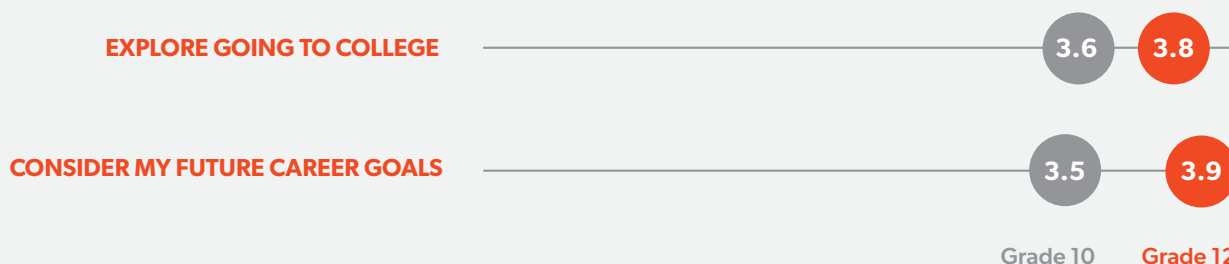
Results from the student survey provide further evidence that students had increased opportunities to interact with new people and cultures. The matched comparison showed a significant increase from 8th to 12th grade in how respondents agreed that, through their program, they get to interact with people from different cultures (Figure 12). In the same comparison, respondents' agreement with the statement, "At my program, my peers and I get to...experience new places" maintained at a high level from 8th and 12th grade, respectively. At 12th grade, 100% of Cohort 1 agreed that they got to experience new places, and 91% agreed that they got to interact with people from different cultures through the program.

Together, these data suggest that the AI program exposed students to new ideas, people, cultures, and places. Through these experiences, students became comfortable navigating the unknown, and some were inspired to continue seeking novelty.

FIGURE 13.

Survey respondents reported **significant increases* in the extent to which the AI program helped them explore going to college and consider future career goals** from 10th to 12th grade, $n=22$

Being in this program has helped me...



*significant at the 0.05 alpha level.

New post-secondary pathways

In addition to exposure, AI programs also helped students expand their perspectives on possibilities for their own lives after high school. Many students and program managers discussed the impact of college tours in helping students visualize themselves going to college for the first time in their lives. A conversation between students in a focus group further illustrates how AI programs broadened students' aspirations. One student mentioned how going on trips, like college visits, "gets people out of their shell." Another student agreed, "Yeah, I don't think I actually would've went [sic] on a college tour if it weren't for this," referring to their AI program.

"You can just see it on their faces and in their posture by the end of those urban experiences — they are not afraid anymore; they could do their own trip there or live there."

— PROGRAM MANAGER

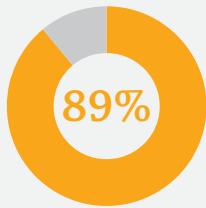
Older students gained more confidence and put their resilience skills to the test on the big trips they helped plan to cities like Montreal, New York, and Washington D.C. Echoing her colleagues across the sites, one program manager described how during these trips, students "go from being scared to go on a Metro, and by the end of the trip, some kids see themselves

going to college in a city." Going to new cities allowed students to test themselves in an unfamiliar environment and realize they can navigate it. For some students, this realization confirmed their enthusiasm for wanting to live in a different, bigger place. When asked about the most impactful program element or experience, one 12th grader wrote, "Getting to go on trips that expanded my knowledge on myself, and having someone to talk with." This demonstrates how the trusting relationships students built over time in the programs opened them up to learning about who they were and who they wanted to be during their more significant excursions.

The student survey supports the idea that the AI program bolstered students' college and career exploration, knowledge, and ability to set loftier post-secondary goals. Figure 13 displays students' perceptions of how much their AI program helped them discover college and career opportunities as they progressed through the program. Between 10th and 12th grade, respondents reported significant increases in the extent to which the AI program helped them explore going to college and consider future career goals. By 12th grade, 100% of Cohort 1 agreed that their AI program helped them consider their future career goals, and 97% agreed that the program helped them explore going to college.

FIGURE 14.

Most 12th grade students (Cohort 1) plan to attend a two- or four-year college after high school, *n=46*



PLAN TO ATTEND A 2- OR 4-YEAR COLLEGE

College and Career Aspirations

As discussed in the previous section on expanded horizons, AI programs exposed participants to an array of experiences with a particular focus on career and college exploration, despite the restrictions imposed on programs for over two years by the pandemic. Students and program managers described how these experiences nevertheless expanded what students believed was possible for their lives — whether it was being the first person in their family to go to college or living in a bustling city — which in turn shifted students’ post-secondary plans. As a result, by June 2023, 89% of Cohort 1 planned to attend a two-year or four-year college in the coming fall (Figure 14). Journey and River Runners reported that 100% of their Cohort 1 participants planned to attend college after high school, while I Know ME had the largest proportion of graduates who planned to enter the workforce after graduation (20%).

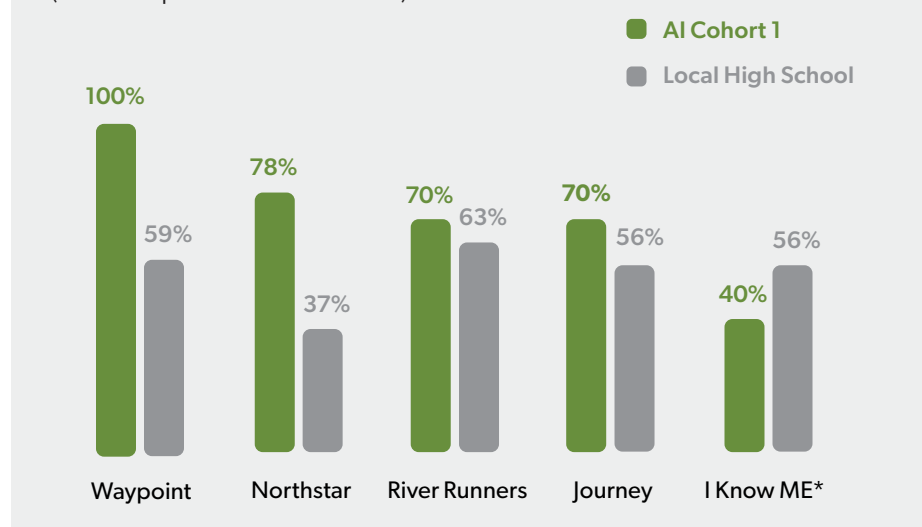
A follow-up in the fall of 2023 showed some attrition from college-going plans to actual college enrollment, down to 74%. However, some students opted to pursue alternative post-secondary pathways such as going into the Armed Forces, getting a trade certification, or participating in AmeriCorps. These are still seen as positive outcomes for the Aspirations Incubator because the model supports and encourages students’ exploration and pursuit of many purposeful pathways (not just post-secondary education) in its effort to meet students where they are. When using this more expansive definition, 85% of Cohort 1 participants were found to be pursuing purposeful post-secondary pathways as of fall 2023. For comparison, Figure 15 shows that the college-going rates for AI students were typically higher than all students attending their local area high schools.

“Kids get asked what they want to do all the time, but they are never getting asked by people who really care about who they are and who understands them.”

— PROGRAM MANAGER, 2023

FIGURE 15.

As of December 2023, Cohort 1’s **two- or four-year college going rates were higher for most AI sites** when compared to the local high school (Maine Department of Education)



*The Ecology Learning Center, one of the high schools I Know ME students attended, did not report college-going to the Maine DOE.²³



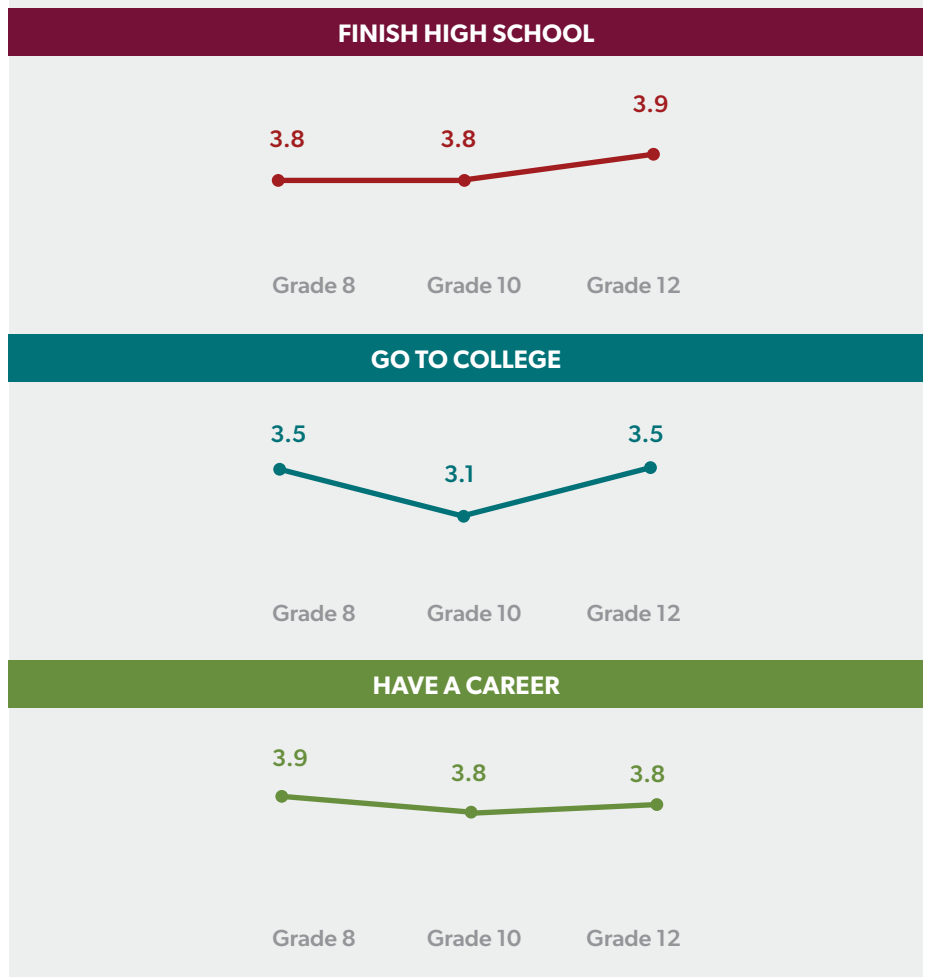
Maintaining aspirations

Part of the benefit of the AI program seems to be how it helped students maintain or recover their post-secondary aspirations, particularly college-going aspirations, throughout the six-year program. Although we were only able to match a small number of students at their 8th grade, 10th grade, and 12th grade surveys (17 out of 46 possible responses), this analysis showed students maintained their belief that they will finish high school and have a career at the three timepoints (Figure 16). Interestingly, this group of students experienced a drop in their belief that they will go to college from 8th to 10th grade, but their self-reported belief recovered to the exact level it had been in 8th grade by the time they were about to graduate in 2023.

It is important to note that the 10th grade year for Cohort 1 was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely influenced students' perceptions at that point in time. This mirrors the trend among their older peers in Maine at that time, whose college enrollment rates had a substantial drop in 2020 and continued to decline in 2021.²⁴

FIGURE 16.

Students matched in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade **either maintained or recovered their self-reported school, college, and career aspirations** through the six-year program, $n=17$



“This program has helped me succeed in school and be excited about my future.”

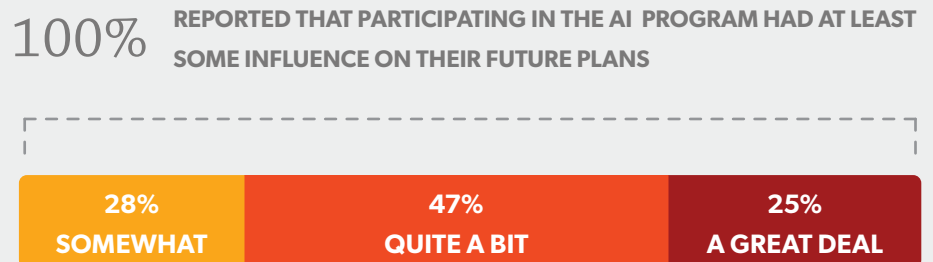
— 12TH GRADE STUDENT, 2023

Understanding program contribution

Without a counterfactual it is challenging to know the extent to which the AI program directly contributed to these positive outcomes around aspirations and post-secondary plans. However, students’ feedback in surveys and focus groups, and observations from program managers reveal some insights. The 12th grade survey asked respondents how much their AI program influenced their future plans to which all respondents reported that the program had at least some influence; 47% selected quite a bit and 25% chose a great deal (Figure 17).

FIGURE 17.

All 12th grade survey respondents reported that **participating in their AI program had some influence on their future plans**, $n=32$



“[It] helps you get a grasp on what you want to do with your life. [It] gives you more opportunities that my mom would never have had. So, I might as well take it, and do it, just to get those extra opportunities that other people didn’t.”

— FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT, 2023

Other students reiterated this finding in surveys and focus groups. Starting as young as 8th grade, many described the program as having an impact on their ability to explore what they want to do in their future. When asked to reflect on all their years in the program, several 11th and 12th graders shared sentiments such as, “It has been amazing and altered my path as well as expanding [sic] my knowledge of possible paths.” One focus group participant explained how the program had helped them get a grasp of what they want to do with their life and gave them opportunities their caregiver never had.

Students explained how the mentorship they received through the program helped them overcome hurdles that prevented them from considering more challenging (and, often more rewarding) post-secondary plans. For some participants, the AI program also helped clarify the why behind their post-secondary goals. As students got older, their perception of the role the AI program had in their lives changed in the context of college and career readiness. According to one Program Manager, at first students saw the program as a way to spend time outside school with peers, but by their junior year they started to realize that the adults in their programs would help them with concrete steps toward their future goals, such as setting up a job shadow. One focus group participant provided an example of this scenario, recounting a time when their program manager connected them to a job opportunity to explore their interest in science over the summer. This student’s story illustrates the value of the extra “push” that program managers and mentors provide: “If you voice an interest in anything, [my program manager] will help you do things that could help you get into college.”

Summary

These results show the different ways students within the pilot grew over time. While the evidence cannot show how much the AI program alone contributed to this growth, there was some evidence to suggest a connection between participation and outcomes. For instance, most students built strong relationships with their peers and with the adults in their cohorts; from the beginning, they felt their programs were safe and welcoming environments. This laid the groundwork for growth in other key areas:

Relationships and Belonging

- ▶ Between 8th and 12th grade, on average, respondents felt more connected to their community and more like they belonged to something meaningful. By 12th grade, 100% of Cohort 1 agreed that the program helped them feel like they belong to something meaningful.
- ▶ When compared to all Maine students at the same grade level, AI students reported consistently higher rates of agreement with the statement “I feel like I matter to the people in my community” at 8th, 10th, and 12th grade.

Connection to Supportive Adults

- ▶ 100% of 12th grade survey respondents said they plan to stay in touch with their program manager after they left high school.

Social and Emotional Growth

- ▶ Students in focus groups shared that they came out of their shells, learned emotional regulation, and opened up.
- ▶ Survey data shows that students reported significant increases, on average, in their assertiveness and optimism.
- ▶ Many students took leadership roles to improve their own communities and expressed that they are more open to new cultures and people.

Learning and School Engagement

- ▶ On average, AI students scored better in English and Math exams in 11th grade than their peers.
- ▶ They were also less likely to be chronically absent compared to their peers.

Expanded Horizons

- ▶ Trips both small and large helped students get more comfortable navigating the unknown.
- ▶ Students throughout the program broadened their scope for possible paths after high school. Some set loftier goals for themselves than they may have otherwise.

College and Career Aspirations

- ▶ 89% of AI students decided to go to college, and 74% enrolled in college in fall 2023. At most sites, college enrollment was higher than the program’s local high school. By comparison, Maine’s overall college enrollment rate in 2021 was 52.7%.²⁵
- ▶ 47% of 12th graders shared that participating in their AI program had quite a bit of influence on their future plans; 25% said it had a great deal of influence.

As discussed in the following section, the successes of the program in terms of outcomes for youth were related to a site’s ability to implement the program. These results, along with the following observations, point to the critical elements of the model and offer clues as to how it may be replicated.





What Makes the Model Work

Reflections from program managers and site leadership over the six-year pilot revealed that the Aspiration Incubator's intentionally flexible model, articulated through the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles, was essential to its success. Critically, sites must be able to integrate this model into their operations, and the evaluation team's analysis identified three key components that enable sites to do so. Sites must have the capacity and genuine willingness to maintain a strong connection to area schools; foster organizational buy-in so that the AI program is well-integrated within the organization; and develop organizational policies and procedures that support agility.

Importantly, some AI sites that were part of the six-year pilot did not have all these capacities at the start of the initiative but were able to cultivate them to respond to the needs of the AI program. Likewise, future sites must be prepared to embrace the organizational changes necessary to work toward readiness both before and during AI program implementation.

KEY PROGRAM INTEGRATION FACTORS



Adaptability to Different Contexts

Site staff and leadership cited flexibility as a strength of the Trekkers Principles.

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Connections to Schools

A program's relationship with its corresponding school district was integral to success.

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Program Integration & Organizational Buy-in

Successful AI programs were fully integrated into the host site.

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Organizational Agility

A site's adaptability eased implementation and impacted student outcomes.

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“The power of the principles themselves was the greatest facilitator of success.”

— SITE LEADERSHIP, 2023

Adaptability to Different Contexts

Having a flexible model was a crucial feature of the Aspirations Incubator initiative, and site staff and leadership often cited it as a strength of the model. Staff and leadership saw the value in most, if not all, of the Trekker Principles and bought into the model increasingly over the six years. Although the Rural Futures Fund structured the principles with operationalized fidelity targets, the core principles left room for interpretation which helped site staff and leadership develop an AI program tailored to their unique organizational and community context. One program manager explained how this balance of structure and room for adaptation made it easier to buy into the model because there was space for the organization to put its “unique spin” on the framework and feel ownership of the result. By introducing the Trekkers Principles as a guide and allowing each site to develop program practices that felt right for their own organizations and communities, the Aspirations Incubator approach ensured a strong yet flexible base for each program to grow and evolve over the six-year pilot.

Connections to Schools

Throughout the pilot, individual program managers and site leadership described how their program's relationship with its corresponding school district was integral to success. Evidence consistently demonstrated that programs with stronger connections to the schools had an easier time with implementation; each time a program manager lost their direct connection to their school, they listed it as a significant challenge that year. Conversely, each time a program manager gained more access to the schools, they would mention this as a facilitator of their success in implementing the program.

Site organizations and program managers worked hard to cultivate trust with their schools' administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers. A strong program-school relationship often resulted in the AI site having an established, physical presence within the school. Examples of this include getting access to a room once a week, having a homeroom section, and having a dedicated office space. Oftentimes when AI staff were embedded in the schools, they also received access to school online learning platforms and databases, which helped them understand their students' academic realities.

“A strong relationship with the school district has been really big. [It] has allowed us to be more fluid with our wraparound support and [even] preventative. It also is something the families really value, they know that we're well connected at the schools and that we can advocate for their students.”

— PROGRAM MANAGER, 2023

With the AI program integrated in the school, program managers connected with more students more often. This improved program managers' ability to interact with students outside of core program activities, foster team building, and create more opportunities for student input in decision-making around program planning. The program-school relationship also significantly impacted recruitment efforts, where

program staff were able to meet many students “where they're at, by spending time in school/classrooms.” One Program Manager explained that they met the most students by spending time at the afterschool homework help day. A program's daily presence in schools also gave program staff a better understanding of interpersonal dynamics and school culture. This enabled programs to celebrate students' successes related to their academic and extracurricular activities. In turn, the AI program became a familiar entity for students, teachers, counselors, and administrators.

When programs were embedded in the school, it became easier for program managers to form holistic relationships with their students and provide effective wraparound support for them. For instance, some program managers discussed how they worked to ease the transition between middle school and high school for their students. They set up meetings in advance with teachers and advisors to point out areas where they may need extra support. Program managers and site leadership also shared examples of schools contacting the AI program directly if there was a challenging situation with an AI student. Over time, many schools trusted AI programs as an entity that had a deep connection with students and viewed the program as part of the team working to ensure student success. As one program reported, their program's connection to the school allowed them to “provide guidance and perspective to the educators that work on a daily basis with our shared students.”

When school staff trusted and relied on the AI program, they demonstrated it by using AI staff as a resource. The benefits of this trust and connection became rapidly apparent during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, schools relied on the AI programs to communicate with students and keep them engaged in online learning. Further, interviews with site leadership in the final reporting year revealed that school districts demonstrated their value of the AI program through a financial commitment: some districts are helping to fund their AI program post-pilot.



Barriers to positive program-school relationships

Program managers and site leadership successfully invested in their relationships with the school when they balanced advocating for their own program with listening to the needs of the school district and being responsive. However, certain factors made these intentions challenging or even impossible at times. Administrative turnover posed a challenge for some programs, requiring extra time to regain trust. School districts with more limited resources were often less open to AI programs, and program managers struggled to make inroads.

Programs hosted at site organizations with pre-existing, strong ties to the school and a well-known, positive reputation within the community tended to experience more seamless relationships with the school. Other sites had to work harder to establish a reputation for their AI program. One site administrator shared that to leverage all the implementation benefits that come with a consistent relationship with its school, a program

needs to have “an authentic relationship based on mutual value and respect to the highest level within the school district.” This must be facilitated by the program manager’s “on the ground” work, as well as the leadership, values, and ethos of the organization’s administration. Future sites should consider their current relationship with surrounding school districts and how to start laying the groundwork for a strong partnership well in advance to launching an AI program.

Program Integration and Organizational Buy-In

Over the six-year pilot, the evaluation found time and again that successful AI programs were fully integrated into the host site. In practice, this meant the AI program had dedicated staff, was compatible with the site’s organizational infrastructure and philosophy, and the site could clearly articulate how the AI program contributed to its overall mission within the context of its larger organization.



Dedicated staff

Programs faced fewer barriers when their host organization invested in committed, excited, and energetic staff dedicated to making the AI program principles fit the context and vision of their organization. One site leader put it simply when he shared that the AI program is “not something that grows or sustains on its own. It needs to be cultivated, taken care of, and protected.” This required that an organization maintain staff aligned with the AI program’s mission and committed to working through challenges that arose during the pilot phase. Not only did successful sites recruit staff that dedicated to the AI program’s mission, but they invested in training for staff, which included executive leadership, supervisors, and program directors on the principles, vision, and implementation of the AI program.

Perhaps the most important staff investment a site could make was to focus on recruiting and retaining their program managers. Having skilled, resilient, and trainable program managers who were dedicated to the program and vision was essential. Staff turnover in the program manager position was one of the biggest challenges programs faced; the loss of a program

manager led to several organizations pulling out of the AI pilot altogether.

Infrastructure and organization mission

Program managers and site organizations identified that a successful organization would already have infrastructure in place to accommodate the AI program. This infrastructure was in many ways common among the host organizations during the pilot. On a basic level, implementation went smoother when programs already had the resources in-house to support programming: transportation, outdoor gear, and dedicated space are some examples. In site interviews, program managers also frequently reported that a strong administrative infrastructure relieved some of the operational burden of managing volunteers and coordinating hiring and training of new staff. Finally, fundraising was a critical area of organizational capacity. Organizations that had staff dedicated to writing grants and connecting with funders, along with strong community ties, could alleviate program managers and other site staff of this responsibility.



“[Our AI program] helped link the afterschool programming to our high school and post-secondary scholarships.”

— SITE LEADERSHIP, 2023

Clarity on AI program status within organization

Sites set themselves up to effectively deliver on the structures and systems needed for AI programming when they were clear about how the AI program contributed to the mission of the organization. Program managers shared the sentiment that the AI program should fit into the other programs being offered by the host organization and should not compete with them. By the end of the pilot, at many sites, the AI program was fully integrated into the mission and operations of the site organization. Many sites discussed how their entire organization learned from the AI model, and many of their other youth-facing programs now implement some of the AI frameworks and principles.

Appropriately integrating the AI model into an organization directly impacted the sustainability of the program, both during and after the pilot phase. Transparency and communication about the long-term commitment, including funding, from an organization’s leadership and board often went hand in hand with the other organizational adaptations that ensured smooth implementation.

When the AI program was valued and embraced as part of the host organization’s overall work, staff and board members from the site who were not directly involved in the AI program’s day-to-day functioning still supported its students. For example, YMCA staff helped with some River Runners events, and seniors presented a final project to the YMCA CEO. In turn, River Runners students volunteered at the YMCA and helped the organization with its events. Similarly, two of the 4-H board members for Bryant Pond were program volunteers with NorthStar. These anecdotes illustrate how organizational buy-in manifests at all levels, and stems from a clear sense of how the AI program fits into the organization’s functioning, mission, and values.

Organizational Agility

A site’s ability to accommodate and adapt to the needs of their AI program also impacted ease of implementation and student outcomes. Organizational agility directly reflected a site’s ability to create a caring support network, since responsive network building around a young person within their community requires flexibility. Additionally, organizations that displayed this kind of flexibility also clearly defined the AI program’s role within their organization as described above. When the program and organization worked to be compatible, organizations were more resilient, could adapt quickly, and were better able to maintain supportive networks for their students during times of staff turnover, school administration changes, or other disruptive events.

A clear example of program and organization resiliency were the months and then school years immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations that had integrated their AI program and were practicing the AI principles to a high degree were able support their program managers in adjusting to fully remote programming. During this time, they demonstrated resiliency by helping program managers set up reliable internet connections in their homes, drawing on existing connections with social service agencies to support families, and by developing policies that helped

“I was happy that the [organization] took into consideration that it is an important part of the program [informal relationship building] and they let me see my kids in the driveway with masks and being socially distant.”

— PROGRAM MANAGER, 2020



program managers maintain connections with their students while balancing COVID risks.

Agility and adaptiveness were critical during this pilot phase as program staff made myriad adjustments to fit the model to the particular and changing circumstances of their organization, school district, community, and, most importantly, students. Perhaps most obviously, organizations had to be open to shifting risk management practices to accommodate program designs and activities rooted in the Trekkers Principles. For example: creating new internal policies around social media guidelines so that program managers could engage in informal relationship building with students outside of core program activities; allowing program managers to drive students in their personal vehicles; or changing limits on the number of students permitted to go on an outdoor overnight trip.

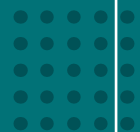
Program managers at some sites shared that they received push back on some of these operational “exceptions” — when organizations were unwilling to compromise, it revealed deeper misalignments between the organization and the program’s mission. When organizations learned how to balance the high expectations of the AI program, managers felt better supported and were able to dedicate more time to implementing the principles to fidelity and working toward student outcomes. This balance required commitment on the organization’s part to the program at all levels, and a demonstrated desire to work through the growing pains of the pilot phase to sustainably integrate the AI program.

Summary

The pilot implementation of the Aspirations Incubator model revealed key areas of focus that organizations should consider when replicating this model. Common themes were flexibility and resiliency; successful sites modeled these values and returned to them when they faced challenges. A first critical step for sites was embracing the AI model by focusing on core elements while being willing and able to adapt it to the host organization and community contexts. Further, organizations facilitated their AI program’s success when they adapted their policies to meet the program’s needs. Throughout these adjustments, trust and transparency were vital, especially regarding the long-term sustainability and commitment to the AI program. Adaptability and collaboration were also key as both program managers and organizational leadership built on, maintained, or re-built effective and trusting relationships with their partner school districts. Finally, organizations had to clearly understand and communicate how the AI program fit into their mission, values, and overall organizational structure.

READINESS FACTORS FOR YOUTH SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

- 1. Engage Governing Boards from the Start:** Each organization's board needs to be involved in the decision to adopt a program that uses the AI model and be involved in the planning and integration of the program into the overall organization. The board must see and agree with how the program fits within the organization's mission and understand what it means to commit to this kind of long-term program.
- 2. Ensure Leadership Stability Before Launching a New Program:** Launching a new program within an organization requires stable and supportive executive leadership. If the organization has experienced a leadership transition within the last year, or there is a leadership transition in process or anticipated in the year to come, the organization should wait to launch a new AI program until the executive leadership has been in place for at least one year.
- 3. Ensure Strong Connection to Local Schools:** Like the previous readiness factor, potential host organizations must have, or be working towards developing, a strong connection to their local middle and high schools. The work of building these partnerships cannot fall to program staff alone; board members and organizational leadership must help facilitate these conversations and connections.
- 4. Willingness to Involve a Broader Range of Stakeholders in Training:** Organizations must have a culture that supports learning and professional development, and they must be ready to include various organizational stakeholders—such as executive leadership, supervisors, board members, and development staff—in the intensive trainings on the AI model and the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles. This facilitates a shared understanding within organizational teams and gives them space to identify institutional barriers earlier in the planning and implementation process.
- 5. Initiate Discussions on Knowledge Management Sooner:** Implementing a knowledge management system should be discussed and initiated during the training and planning phase. Many sites faced vulnerabilities throughout the pilot due to a lack of systems to capture and disseminate crucial program knowledge, including philosophy, curriculum, and budget management.
- 6. Establish Robust Volunteer Recruitment and Management Systems:** Potential host organizations need to have robust volunteer recruitment and management systems, or adequate lead time to set them up before implementing their AI program. Many organizations struggled to focus on volunteer strategies alongside program implementation, placing undue pressure on program managers.



Key Takeaways from the Pilot

The evaluation's findings around student outcomes and the critical elements of the Aspirations Incubator model revealed several lessons learned and important takeaways from the Aspirations Incubator pilot. The following section focuses on key findings that have implications beyond the scope of this pilot and may have value to the broader field of positive youth development, philanthropy, and policy in Maine and beyond. These include a recognition of how the AI model intervenes at several levels of students' realities; that relationships are the vehicle of change for young people; that longer-term engagement helps young people weather the many developmental challenges of transitioning from middle school to high school and onto a post-secondary path; and how the intersection of relationship building, student cohorts, and long-term engagement foster belonging, an important protective factor. In this section, we also discuss the general costs associated with running this long-term program.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



The AI Model Supports Students at Several Levels

Programs support students at the individual, interpersonal, and community levels.

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Relationships are Both a Tool & an Outcome

Positive relationships function as both vehicles for change, and are an important outcome.

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Long-Term Engagement Values Depth Over Breadth

Long-term models require funders and organizations see the value in having a deeper impact on fewer people.

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Involving Families & Caregivers Promotes Equity

AI programs were a consistent source of support for families which increased trust and improved access to opportunities.

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Funding a Long-Term Model Can be Sustainable

The average annual cost per AI student is less than the annual cost per student for an afterschool program.

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The AI Model Supports Students at Several Levels

Though the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles are not structured around the socio-ecological framework, they nevertheless guided programs to understand and support their students at several of the framework's levels: the individual, interpersonal, and community levels (Figure 18). This is noteworthy because prevention and intervention programs have been shown to be more effective when they are designed to act across multiple social ecological levels.²⁶

The social-ecological model is grounded in the recognition that adolescents' optimal development and well-being are contingent upon interacting

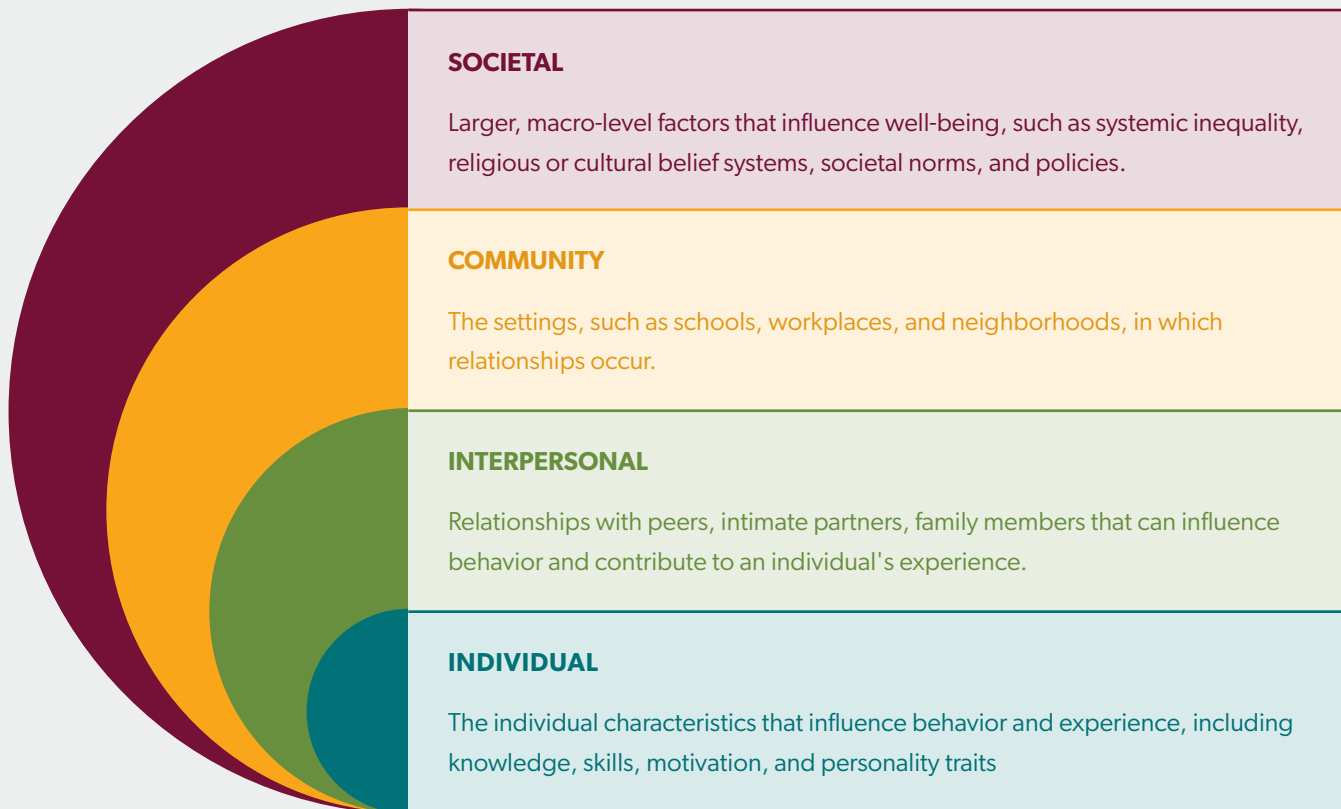
biological factors and environmental/contextual factors, which include family, community, sociocultural, economic, political, and policy influences, and the services and structures that surround them.

Having a similar theoretical grounding, the AI model and the Trekkers Youth Programming Principles encourage a youth development approach that employs customized strategies rooted in a thorough comprehension of each student's specific lived experience, strengths, and challenges.

In the following callout box, we discuss how the AI model acts on several social ecological levels.

FIGURE 18.

Social Ecological Model



HOW THE PRINCIPLES ACT WITHIN THE SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL LEVELS

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

The AI model acts at the individual level through the strengths-based framework of the PEAR Institute's Clover Model, which AI staff were trained in and used to develop their program design (Principle #4). This framework helped them reframe sometimes challenging student behaviors as adaptive strengths. They shared this focus on strengths with their students, which in turn helped students' social-emotional growth and improved their self-concept. The Clover Model and its complimentary Holistic Student Assessment identified students' strengths and challenges through a standardized questionnaire, and it also acted as an early warning system that showed when students' perceptions began to deteriorate (Principle #11). Additionally, several principles that acted on the interpersonal or community level - Expanding Worldviews (#7), Encouraging Community Engagement (#9), and Raising Optimism and Post-Secondary Aspirations (#10) – also fostered changes on the individual-level around students' beliefs, knowledge, skills, and perceptions about themselves and others.

INTERPERSONAL LEVEL

The model's strong focus on relationship building (Principle #1) and in particular, informal relationship building (Principle #6), where program managers did things like attend a student's sports game or take a student fishing, acts on the interpersonal level, as did the incorporation of adult and peer mentors (Principle #3). Program managers also incorporated student input into the decision-making process (Principle #8) so that students could also advocate for their individual and collective interests within their cohorts. The model's structure around following cohorts of students overtime cultivated strong peer-to-peer relationships and played a key role in students' feelings of connection and belonging. By engaging students' families (Principle #2), AI programs also honored and supported students as individuals existing within families that have their own set of unique strengths and challenges. Many program managers functioned as trusted liaisons between students and their families, families and schools, and families interacting with other families.

COMMUNITY LEVEL

The AI model focuses on how individual students are also nested within communities and systems through Principle #5, Create a Caring Support Network. In service of this principle, program managers built relationships at schools to better understand and support their students in this critical academic and social context. They regularly collaborated with school social workers, guidance counselors, teachers, and principals. They also developed a broader circle of support around their students by building relationships with community organizations, like mental health agencies, food pantries, and social service agencies, so that program managers could activate those wraparound supports when a student or their family was in need. Recognizing that young people also benefit from participating in their communities, AI programs used community engagement and leadership opportunities to encourage students' unique interests and to connect students to opportunities (Principle #9); a strategy that also acts on the interpersonal level.



“We came in with initial expectations, some of which were correct and some not correct. One of the not correct (expectations) is that we overemphasized the trips, and we realize that the relationship building and bonding is the most important part.”

— SITE LEADERSHIP, 2023

Relationships are Both a Tool and an Outcome

In this program model, positive relationships function as both the vehicle by which outcomes occur, and an important outcome itself. When students have strong relationships with their program manager and their peers, they feel safe. This sense of security is a necessary precondition for students to open up, feel greater confidence in themselves, and ultimately become active participants in planning their future.

The COVID-19 pandemic cemented the power of the relationships program managers established with their students and the relationships students developed with each other. In 2020, one school guidance counselor remarked, “I think the relationships that were formed prior to the building closures really allowed the students to continue their relationship with [the Program Manager] during crisis schooling. I think it speaks to the relationships she built prior to the building closures. And by the same token, it has facilitated their return to schooling here in the fall.” Furthermore, during remote schooling, several schools reached out to program managers for assistance in reaching students and their families when they struggled to contact them.

Honoring this insight requires a theoretical and philosophical restructuring for any organization, program, or funder interested in this type of comprehensive mentoring and youth development. Many youth-serving organizations focus on getting young people involved in a type of activity or experience — outdoor adventure, non-electronic games, college readiness — but as one site leader explained, “...those activities are only as good as the mentorship relationship that results.” Three years later, the same site leader connected the importance of relationship building to the longer-term outcomes of college and career aspirations:

“Raising aspirations for college, careers, future – what we now know ... the thing that moves the needle on aspirations is that long-term relationship-based support. A model of youth development programming where the relationship is the focus, and the activity is just the context in which that relationship can take root, bloom, and blossom.”

This insight emphasizes the importance of centering relationship building in youth development programs. While it was a key component of the AI model from the start, the pilot continuously revealed the importance of relationship building above other elements.

HOW TO WEAVE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING THROUGHOUT A PROGRAM AND ORGANIZATION

- 1. Adopt a relationship-first philosophy:** Embrace a philosophical shift within the organization, moving from a program-first approach to a relationship-first approach. Prioritize the development of systems, protocols, and policies that make scaling relationships over time a top priority. This shift fundamentally changes how the organization operates, placing a greater emphasis on nurturing and maintaining meaningful connections with youth and families.
- 2. Establish organizational policies that facilitate informal relationship building:** This involves showing up and being present in the lives of youth and families outside of formal programming. This can be achieved through policies that enable program managers to meet with participants one-on-one and provide transportation when needed. Additionally, communication policies should allow program managers to connect with participants and their families through various channels such as text, social media, or other online platforms.
- 3. Adopt a cohort-based model:** Implement a cohort-based model that fosters deep relationship building and bonding among peers. This approach creates a sense of community and support among participants, enhancing their overall experience and connection with the program.
- 4. Build organizational capacity for mentorship:** Develop the capacity and systems needed to recruit and retain both peer and adult mentors. These mentors play a crucial role in facilitating and strengthening the relationships within the organization.
- 5. Invest in program staff:** Recognize that program staff are often the most impactful adults with whom participants interact. Provide the necessary support, training, and resources to empower program staff to excel in their roles as relationship builders within the organization and in the community.

Long-Term Engagement Values Depth Over Breadth

The AI model is a long-term intervention that follows participants from 7th grade through their graduation or departure from high school. A program that promises to follow participants for six years has many strengths and challenges. It can be a daunting level of commitment for organizations, staff, students, and families alike. In terms of impact, it also calls for a shift away from the philanthropic goal of reaching as many people as possible in a short time frame and requires funders and organizations to see the value in having a deeper impact on fewer people over time.

Long-term engagement fosters belonging

The combination of adult-student relationship building, cohort-based programming, and long-term engagement fostered a strong sense of belonging among participants. AI students reported consistently high feelings of belonging throughout their years in the program, which they attributed to their AI program. When compared to their peers across Maine, Cohort 1 reported feeling that they matter to the people in their community at a higher percentage than students in the same grade (8th, 10th, and 12th grades). Both groups experienced a drop in feeling they matter to their communities during 10th grade and the pandemic, but Cohort 1 rebounded to a greater degree.

A secure sense of belonging is an important contributor to many positive outcomes for youth, and helps to protect against negative experiences, such as depression and suicide ideation.^{27,28} In fact, belongingness is believed to be a fundamental need, something that is essential for an individual's psychological health and well-being.²⁹ However, as demonstrated by the statewide Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS) estimates, many young people in Maine feel disconnected from their communities and do not feel as though they matter. This has greater implications for rural Maine students who have disproportionately lower rates of feeling they matter to their communities.³⁰ Building small and intentional long-term communities through cohort-based

programming appears to be a potentially effective strategy to ameliorate the harmful effects of adolescent isolation.

Long-term engagement sustains aspirations

The evaluation results have upheld the value of long-term engagement in increasing and sustaining aspirations. It was seen most clearly in the way Cohort 1's college-going aspirations were high at the end of middle school, dropped substantially by 10th grade, yet rebounded by 12th grade. Students making the 9th grade transition have been shown to be vulnerable to declining academic achievement, and without support are more likely to fail classes or drop out of school.³¹ Other sources identify how, for rural youth, this transition can spark the process of "aspirational foreclosure." When students in rural communities leave their smaller K-8 schools and transition to larger high schools outside their hometown, they can lose the strong relationships they built with former teachers and other community members.³² Without the continuity of relationship building, they miss out on opportunities to have their talents, interests, and potential recognized, nurtured, and developed. Long-term models like the Aspirations Incubator help students feel continuity and support through this major transition.

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the value of sticking with students and deepening relationships in the long-term. Cohort 1's college aspirations score dropped in their 10th grade year, which also corresponded with the most restrictive period of the pandemic. Regional data adds further evidence to illustrate the negative impact COVID-19 had on aspirations and college enrollment. In Maine, college enrollment rates dropped substantially in the fall of 2020 and continued to decline to 52.7% in 2021.³³ This period of time also saw a widening gap in the college enrollment rates of economically disadvantaged students (35.5%) compared to their counterparts (59.4%). Given this context, the rebound in college aspirations for Cohort 1 in the later years of the pandemic underscores the promise of programs that intentionally foster meaningful, personal, and long-term relationships with students.

“One thing that I think is interesting is students’ perception of why [the program] is important...At first it was about spending time outside and with peers, and now they are like, ‘Oh, you are going to help me set up a job shadow.’ The impact of being able to stay connected with a group of students as they grow, and the goals of the program grow. That longevity is really impactful.”

— PROGRAM MANAGER, 2023

Involving Families and Caregivers Promotes Equity

The AI model was designed to create a program with low barriers to entry, with the long-term goal of creating equitable access to mentorship, excursions, and extracurricular activities that boost social and emotional growth and college readiness. These opportunities are often unavailable to students living in rural areas, especially those coming from households and/or school districts with fewer resources.

From the start of the pilot, RFF and the AI sites understood that it was important to engage families and caregivers in order to recruit and retain students and effectively provide wraparound supports. However, by the third year of the pilot and especially after observing how mutual trust between program managers and families was essential for continued engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear that engaging families and caregivers was an essential principle of the model. In response, RFF added Principle #2, Fostering Mutual Trust Between Families and Program Staff, which involves nurturing a caring, compassionate, and equitable relationship between program staff and the parents, caregivers, and extended family members responsible for raising the young people participating in the program. The pilot revealed that when families trusted program staff and understood the program and its goals, implementation was easier, and the program was better able to deliver positive student outcomes for all students.

At the start of the pilot, program managers reported mixed levels of family engagement and trust. If their site was a known entity, this typically made it easier for caregivers to buy into the program and encourage their students to apply for and remain in the program. Lesser-known programs had to work harder to gain that initial buy-in. Program managers shared other barriers to family engagement: busy schedules and strained resources. By design, the AI programs serve rural communities where families often face steep challenges ranging from increased housing insecurity to high transportation costs to a lack of critical health care services within a reasonable distance from their home. Given this context, four of the five AI sites offered their AI program at no cost to families, and the one site that did have a program fee also implemented a scholarship option to defray that program cost to families. AI sites learned that they needed to better understand the myriad challenges faced by some of their students’ families to better provide wraparound support. Recognizing the diversity of experiences of AI families, one program manager summarized his team’s approach: “The task is to meet [families] wherever they are and find a place for them in the program.”

Over time, sites honed strategies to overcome these barriers and engage families on deeper levels. While caregiver engagement still began in the recruitment process, sites invested in it throughout the program. Many sites reported new strategies for family outreach, which included hosting family dinners, holding FAFSA^{vii} nights where program staff helped caregivers complete critical college financial aid

vii The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is required to apply for federal grants, loans, work-study, and more to help cover the costs of college or career school.



information, going out to lunch with family members to build rapport, and hosting high school graduation celebrations for families and their friends.

When program managers established a trusting relationship with a student's family, they gained a better understanding of a student's academic, interpersonal, or mental health challenges and opportunities for growth. In turn, program managers could update a family on their student's progress and check in when an issue arose. One program manager observed that a strong relationship with a student's family resulted in a more holistic experience for their student.

Wraparound support often went beyond students to include their families as well. Many program managers discussed how caregivers also benefited from their program's support and that they might appreciate it "just as much as the students." During the pandemic, this meant delivering food to families or connecting them with resources to get their essential needs met. Program managers had to adjust to asking harder

questions, like asking whether families were getting enough to eat. One program manager shared that when there was a conflict between two families of students in the AI program, the families reached out to him as a trusted resource to manage that conflict.

Being a consistent and reliable source of support for families increased their trust of the AI program, which in turn increased involvement in program activities. This directly impacted the program's capacity to support students, intervene during crises, and engage a student's entire family, including their community, to celebrate successes. This finding has implications for what it takes to keep students engaged in a long-term, relationships-focused program. It also reveals that building trust and focusing on individual rapport with families and caregivers is essential to promoting equity within a program.



Funding a Long-Term Model Can be Sustainable

After the six-year pilot grant, all five remaining sites had built the program into their annual budgets and planned to continue the model. One program, Waypoint, is no longer housed at Chewonki, but is now a part of the Midcoast Youth Center. Thankfully, Midcoast Youth Center will continue to serve the Waypoint students who participated before the move.

Although this evaluation did not look at financial data and did not include a return-on-investment analysis, readers might be curious what it cost to fund these long-term models. This is, of course, an important piece of the puzzle. According to the Rural Futures Fund, the average annual cost per program was \$151,676, which covered all the direct and indirect costs of running six cohorts at once. Accounting for fluctuations in cohort enrollment, the average annual cost per student was \$2,002. For programs that serve participants year-round these costs are not outlandish nor particularly high. For comparison, the average amount paid by families per child in an afterschool program is \$100 a week.³⁴ In Maine there about 36

weeks in a school year making the annual family expense approximately \$3,600 per child. As noted earlier in the report, at four of the five Aspirations Incubator sites, the program was offered at no charge to families, and the average organizational cost of running the program was well below the average price of afterschool programming.

Several site staff and leadership also noted that the model is not particularly expensive and there are opportunities to distill the model further which would in turn reduce costs. When one site leader was asked if they would recommend implementing this model to another youth-serving organization, they replied, “100%...Because it works, and it doesn’t take much to work. For the cost of the program, which is nothing compared to so many things that go on here, the positive effect is so long lasting.” Another site leader noted that programs do not need “piles of money” to give participants fun and novel experiences that create group bonding and an expanded sense of what is possible.



Conclusion

Young people in Maine's rural areas are more likely to experience an array of social, health, and economic disparities and their impacts can last well into adulthood and the next generation. However, these young people also have tremendous resilience, grit, and experiences that should be recognized and honored. Middle and high school students are at an important developmental stage when stable relationships with non-family supports can help them feel seen and foster a sense of belonging.³⁵ This in turn has been shown to help them overcome challenges in their lives and increase learning engagement and aspirations.³⁶ Grounded in this knowledge, the Aspirations Incubator initiative sought to test whether they could help raise the aspirations and solidify the post-secondary pathways of rural youth across Maine through a long-term, relationship-based, cohort model that exposed participants to new experiences and opportunities.

Our findings suggest that the Aspirations Incubator helped students by improving and diversifying their supportive relationships, fostering social and emotional growth, increasing feelings of belonging and optimism, and ultimately increasing their aspirations and honing their post-secondary plans. The AI programs also exposed students to new ideas, people, cultures, and places which helped to expand what they thought was possible for them after high school.

Implications for Funders and Policymakers

The implications of these results suggest that to improve rural young people’s lives through the vehicle of youth development interventions, youth-serving programs and organizations should consider making relationship building and community building the core of their work. Centering the relationships of young people, their families, and their community will also require programs to maintain this work over longer periods of time. Moreover, this paradigm shift to longer-term engagement and relationship building has broad implications for philanthropy and policymakers, since they must also see the value of investing in deeper relational work.

Below are some ways funders and policymakers can use the lessons learned through the Aspirations Incubator pilot to better support rural youth in Maine. The following recommendations have been developed in consultation with the Rural Futures Fund leadership.

- ▶ **Ensure Universal Access to Aspirations-Building Programs:** Champion the development and implementation of programs that nurture the aspirations of youth in every rural community across Maine. This priority seeks to ensure that all young people have an opportunity to engage in activities and experiences, both during school hours and in out-of-school settings, which inspire and expand their visions for the future.
- ▶ **Continue to Explore and Invest in Meaningful Alternative Post-Secondary Pathways:** When investing in aspirations-building programs, there also needs to be concurrent initiatives focused on developing more meaningful and viable alternative post-secondary pathways. Two- or four-year college is not the right choice for every young person in Maine, but every young person deserves to have a meaningful post-secondary plan.
- ▶ **Expand Teen Engagement Opportunities:** Advocate to increase out-of-school programs targeting teenagers, recognizing the gap in attention and resources between early childhood and college/career access efforts in late high school. This priority aims to provide Maine’s

teenagers with a wider range of opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and positive engagement during out-of-school times.

- ▶ **Invest in Preventative Long-Term Mentoring:** Call for greater investment in long-term, preventative mentoring programs to address the significant “mentor gap” in Maine’s rural communities and foster deeper cross-generational community engagement. By ensuring more consistent and accessible mentorship, Maine’s youth will benefit from a broader network of guidance and support while addressing ongoing issues of isolation and disengagement of young people in rural communities.
- ▶ **Prioritize Supporting Initiatives that Promote “Looping” in Youth Development Programs:** “Looping” refers to the practice where youth development professionals maintain continuous connections with the same group of young individuals over multiple years. By investing in programs that embrace looping, funders and policymakers can facilitate deeper relationships and ensure continuity in the developmental support system for youth across Maine.
- ▶ **Invest in Field Level Research and Program Evaluation:** Fund more rigorous research and evaluation studies to further elucidate the relationship between belonging and post-secondary pathways for rural young people.



What's Next for the Aspirations Incubator?

Post-Secondary Pathways Evaluation

As the evaluation of the six-year Aspirations Incubator pilot winds down, some pressing questions persist: to what extent do AI participants continue with their post-secondary plans? What are the longer-lasting effects of the AI experience on young people as they start navigating the world? And how does this compare to the experiences and pathways of their peers who did not participate in the Aspirations Incubator? To answer these questions, the Rural Futures Fund has invested in a three-year study of the first two AI cohorts to explore their post-secondary pathways. Moreover, this post-secondary study is simultaneously tracking the AI participants alongside a matched comparison of their grade level peers from the school districts that participated in the Aspirations Incubator. The Data Innovation Project has extended its partnership with the Rural Futures Fund to conduct the post-secondary pathways evaluation, and the first results of this exploration will be available in Winter 2025.



Rural Youth Institute: Building Capacity in the Youth Development Field

Over the past six years, the Rural Futures Fund has been funding the Aspirations Incubator to effectively implement long-term mentoring and comprehensive youth development models in rural Maine communities to help raise post-secondary aspirations. Encouraged by the initial results from this final Aspirations Incubator evaluation report and positive feedback from Aspirations Incubator stakeholders across the state, the Rural Futures Fund board made the decision to launch the Rural Youth Institute in 2024. With the Aspirations Incubator pilot successfully concluded, the Rural Futures Fund will dissolve over the next few years, making way for the Rural Youth Institute to step in and do the work of expanding the Aspirations Incubator to more rural communities in Maine and beyond.

The Rural Youth Institute (RYI) is a proactive youth development incubator that empowers organizations and professionals to promote effective strategies for strengthening and enhancing the aspirations of rural youth. Current Aspirations Incubator sites will continue to receive training and network support through the RYI, as new opportunities for expansion of the Aspirations Incubator are emerging in other rural Maine communities. Alongside the expansion of the Aspirations Incubator model, the Rural Youth Institute will actively promote innovation within the youth development field by funding research, delivering comprehensive professional training, and engaging in strategic advocacy at both the state and federal levels, with the aim of bolstering youth-serving organizations throughout the state of Maine and beyond.

Learn more about the Rural Youth Institute at www.ruralityouthinstitute.org.



Appendix A: Methods and Data Sources

The Aspirations Incubator evaluation design employs a mixed methods approach that utilizes qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the program's implementation and progress towards student outcomes. Included in the analysis were information gathered from the following sources starting in 2017 through 2023: key informant interviews with program managers, organizational leadership, and various community stakeholders; semi-annual site reports; two questionnaires on social-emotional development for children and adolescents developed by PEAR³⁷ called the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) and the Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self-Change (HSA-RSC); supplemental student experience surveys after 8th, 10th and 12th grades; school attendance rates; academic achievement scores on standardized tests; and site visits conducted at three sites in 2020 and 2023, which included student focus groups and site and program observations.

Below are more in-depth descriptions of each of the data collection methods used in the report and the final samples. This is followed by an overall description of study limitations.

Key Informant Interviews

Each program year, all program managers and at least one individual from the leadership of each organization were solicited to participate in interviews. Lists of potential community stakeholders to interview were generated after each round of staff interviews. Program managers helped the Evaluation Team contact those individuals and a second round of interviews were conducted. In Year 2, the evaluation team also interviewed a board member from each organization. A total of 128 interviews were conducted: 27 from Year 1, 23 from Year 2, 28 from Year 3, 17 from Year 4, 17 from Year 5, and 16 from Year 6. RFF staff were also interviewed twice to provide context and feedback from their perspective as the funder and the technical assistance provider to AI programs.

Program managers and organizational leaders were asked the same set of questions about the past year of recruitment and implementation, both its successes and challenges, recommendations, and to learn about the site's future program plans. Board members were asked about the board's role in the program and its integration with the broader organization. Community stakeholders were asked questions about their experiences with the program, the successes and challenges they saw, and what their recommendations were, if any. One peer mentor was under age 18 and active parental consent was obtained in advance of the interview. The University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board approved all interview protocols.

Semi-Annual Site Reports

Site reports were developed to track program process and quality counts around recruitment and enrollment, attendance, program activities, program development, outreach, and staffing. They also gathered open response feedback about the site's successes and lessons learned, and whether they needed any additional support. Site reports were collected from grantees every 6 months. In 2019, the reporting periods were shifted from December–May and June–November to September–February and March–August to better align with the program year. This change

happened midway through the 2018–2019 program year, which resulted one reporting period that is longer than most: December 2018–September 2019. The reports were collected through an online platform (SurveyMonkey at first, then Qualtrics) and Excel Workbooks and PDF files were extracted for analysis.

Holistic Student Assessment

The Rural Futures Fund has an agreement with PEAR to help collect, process, and analyze the HSA and HSA-RSC data on behalf of the AI sites and to produce site specific and aggregate data files. This involves providing a secure, online platform to administer the assessment as well as subsequent cleaning, processing and analysis; for example, to compile scale scores, identify the "tier" into which students fall based on their responses, and to compare the AI responses to the larger pool of HSA/HSA-RSC responses. Per the agreement, the Evaluation Team had access to these processed MS Excel files for each site as well as the aggregate results; these processed data files were used by the Evaluation Team to conduct additional analysis and visualizations for this report.

The Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective Self Change (HSA-RSC) contains 61 items that correspond to the HSA and is completed at the end of the year. It asks students to reflect on their involvement with the program and report the extent to which the program influenced them positively or negatively for each criterion. At the conclusion of the project, 401 total students across all cohorts in had completed at least one HSA-RSC assessment.

Student Survey

Cohorts were asked to participate in a short supplemental student survey after the completion of their 8th grade year (Cohorts 1–5), 10th grade year (Cohorts 1–4), and 12th grade year (Cohort 1). The survey contained 30 questions asking students about their experiences with the program, the extent to which the program has helped them learn skills (e.g., being in this program has helped me take with other people even when we disagree), and self-reported statements about their own behaviors (e.g., I try new

things even when I'm not sure I will like them). The survey tool was administered electronically via an online platform (SurveyMonkey at first, then Qualtrics) and in paper form. Passive consent forms were sent to parents at least three weeks before the survey was given to students. Program managers administered the survey to their students over the course of the summer starting in 2019. The surveys response rates are as follows: 89% in 2019; 93% in 2020; 71% in 2021; 74% in 2022; and 61% in 2023. The University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board approved all survey consents and protocols.

Site Visits and Student Focus Groups

In the original evaluation plan, three site visits were planned for Year 3. NorthStar, I Know ME, and Journey were the three sites selected to have visits. The site visits had a few data collection methods planned, which included a youth focus group with Cohort 1. However, due to COVID-19 only one in-person site visit was conducted at NorthStar before all the sites and their partner schools ceased in-person programming. In order to incorporate more youth voice in the interim report, two virtual focus groups were facilitated in the winter of 2020/2021 using Zoom and Google Hangouts with I Know ME and Journey. The focus group protocol was adapted for these virtual focus groups to utilize Zoom/Google Hangouts chat features and to ask questions about the effects of COVID-19 on the students' program experience. Passive consent forms were sent to parents at least three weeks before the focus group was conducted with students. In the spring of 2023, in-person site visits, which included a youth focus group and program observations, were conducted again with I Know ME, NorthStar, and Journey. The University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board approved all in-person and virtual focus group consents and protocols.

School Data

Starting in fall 2020, AI sites worked with their partner schools to get attendance and achievement records for participating students. In the first round of data collection, they requested historical information for Cohorts 1 and 2 for the 2017–18 and 2019–20 academic years (the 2020–21 school year was not included due to disruptions caused by COVID-19). Thereafter, requests were made annually for the previous academic school year for each active cohort. Using a MS Excel template provided by the DIP, sites sent a request to school personnel that included the list of AI students. Schools then compiled attendance and achievement data for those students, as well as provided aggregate counts for all students in each Cohort's corresponding grade. Attendance data was requested using categories of days absent, with 18+ days absent being considered chronically absent. In the first year, achievement data was requested in the following categories, which could be further defined by each school: "Below, At or Above Grade Level." In 2021–22, the state began to require NWEA testing, and achievement was requested as "Well Below Expectations, Below Expectations, Meets Expectations, Exceeds Expectations." Schools returned the completed data files to the AI sites who removed student identifiers and shared the results with the DIP for review and analysis.

Analysis

Qualitative data were coded and analyzed using NVivo software; quantitative data were analyzed using MS Excel and SPSS to produce descriptive and inferential statistics.

Student Survey Matched Comparison

Program participants were pooled and matched on their 8th and 10th grade student survey responses using a unique key. For Cohort 1, we attempted to match students at three time points in 8th, 10th and 12th grade, and at two time points from 10th to 12th grade. We were able to match 22 Cohort 1 students at 8th and 12th grade; 17 Cohort 1 students were matched at 8th, 10th, and 12th grade and 21 students were matched at 10th and 12th grade. Paired samples tests, paired t-tests and Wilcoxon signed rank test, were run to understand changes in students' responses over time. For the sample of students we could match at three time-points, a one-way ANOVA was conducted.

HSA-RSC Self-Assessment Longitudinal Analysis

Individual students entered and exited the program at various points over the years, and some did not complete an assessment every year in which they were enrolled. For this analysis, assessments were first matched across multiple years; students who had been engaged with the program after 9th grade and those who only had one assessment were then eliminated. To maximize the number of cases included yet ensure that sufficient time had elapsed to make meaningful insights, the research team then designated assessments that were taken in either 8th or 9th grade as timepoint 1; assessments taken in 11th or 12th grade were designated as timepoint 2. Students who did not have data in both timepoints were then eliminated. Finally, if a student had assessments from both 8th and 9th grade, we included the 8th grade assessment in timepoint 1 and eliminated the second assessment. Similarly, if a student had both 11th and 12th grade assessments, we included the 12th grade

assessment in timepoint 2 and eliminated the 11th grade assessment. Therefore, each student included in the final analysis was engaged in the program by 9th grade (if not earlier) and had been involved for at least three years. The final sample includes 79 students from Cohorts 1 and 2 who fell within these parameters. Descriptive statistics were run on dichotomous (yes/no) variables of self-reported positive change and tested using McNemar's test; mean scores were analyzed using paired samples tests, paired t-tests and Wilcoxon signed rank test to understand changes in students' responses over time. Ultimately, however, descriptive statistics from the second timepoint were presented in the report for ease of understanding despite fewer instances of statistically significant results. That is, students were as likely to report some degree of positive change in the first timepoint as the second, but the degree of that change increased on some factors over time.

School Data

The DIP compiled the results shared by each site to create cohort-wide statistics. In addition, the aggregate counts for each school were compiled and the AI cohort totals subtracted to generate the comparative peer statistics. However, the consistency of the school data that were reported and submitted varied across the sites, schools, and years which has precluded meaningful trending. Moreover, the standardized testing guidelines (used to measure achievement) also shifted during the study time period, switching from 11th grade testing in 2021–22 to 10th grade testing in 2023–24. Thus, the final report focused on data were deemed the most reliable and consistent, which yielded comparison attendance data for Cohorts 1 and 2 at Grade 11, and Cohorts 4 and 5 at Grade 8, and achievement data for Cohort 1 at Grade 11 and Cohort 5 at Grade 8.

Limitations

The major limitation for this evaluation study was the lack of a reliable counterfactual sample of similar students who were not enrolled in the AI programs. While we tracked students' progress over time and compared them to themselves, the survey and self-assessment data were unable to conclusively demonstrate that any observed changes were the direct result of program participation rather than normal growth and development. Thus, our conclusions of impact rely heavily on students' own self-reports of attribution, as well as their qualitative observations and statements about the program's impact.

The other major limitation for this study is that we did not track outcomes for students who did not continue with the program (e.g., they withdrew before the 12th grade). That means that the final samples for matched comparisons represent students who stayed with the program. The students who did not complete the program may have faced different life circumstances, challenges or interests than their peers who remained; we cannot say whether or not those factors would have influenced their own growth or the program's positive impacts had they remained.

Moreover, each quantitative data source faced its own set of challenges, summarized below:

- ▶ The student survey was developed specifically for this project and based on a review of literature but has not been normed or validated. This means that it may not reliably produce similar measurement results for all youth in different contexts or settings. In addition, for the student survey matched comparison we were only able to match 37%–48% (depending on the comparison) of Cohort 1 to an earlier survey, meaning our results represent only about half of Cohort 1, and may not represent the full range of experiences for students who did not have matched surveys. Lastly, the four-point scale may have biased the sensitivity of this tool in capturing changes over time when used as a pre-post assessment; that is, a broader scale may have been able to capture more nuanced change over time.
- ▶ Although they are normed and validated tools, the longitudinal data from the HSA and the HSA-RSC was collected at multiple timepoints over the course of a single student's involvement, with students completing each as many as six times. This lends itself to a range of biases, such as knowing what is on the tool before responding, and assessment fatigue. These factors can result in changes to participants' responses or performance over time and reduce reliability. In addition, not all students completed all the assessments and the final sample represents 65% of students enrolled in Cohorts 1 and 2 by the end of the pilot. Lastly, there were inconsistencies in how and when the assessments were administered by sites and across years due to a wide range of circumstances, including the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, taking a retrospective assessment after a planning meeting versus after an exciting trip could influence one's responses. Thus, while the results were generally positive, the statistical significance of the findings may have been compromised.
- ▶ As previously noted, the consistency of the school data that were reported and submitted varied across the sites, schools, and years which meant that a trend analysis was not feasible. Moreover, when pooling the data, we must note that schools may have had widely different rules and experiences regarding the COVID-19 pandemic which could not be accounted for or "normed." In addition, only aggregate statistics were provided for comparative purposes, which limited our ability to conduct meaningful tests of statistical significance when comparing AI students to their peers. Therefore, the school data should be interpreted with caution and care, with focus only on sizable differences observed between the groups.



Endnotes

- 1 More information about Trekkers and the Trekkers Principles can be found on their websites: www.trekkers.org and www.trekkersinstitute.org
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