

# Equity Policy as a Guidepost: Using the PA Common Ground Framework to Complement Efforts to Improve Student Belonging

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## Abstract

*This white paper examines how equity-centered policy tools can function as guideposts for advancing student belonging when integrated into structured improvement work. Drawing on a qualitative action research study of an Equity in Student Belonging Inquiry Community convened by Catalyst @ Penn GSE, the paper explores how educators interpreted and enacted Pennsylvania's Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) competencies within their local contexts. Framed by critical conceptualizations of belonging as relational, political, and structurally produced, the study situates continuous improvement as a promising yet insufficient approach for equity work unless paired with explicit attention to power, identity, and systemic inequity.*

*Data sources included observations of inquiry community meetings, semi-structured interviews with ten experienced school and district leaders, and artifacts documenting shifts in policy and practice. Findings indicate that participants used the CR-SE competencies to establish shared language, legitimize equity-focused work, and strengthen collective accountability. Educators described how the competencies supported deeper inquiry into belonging, informed professional learning and curriculum decisions, and provided justification for equity-oriented initiatives. At the same time, participants highlighted challenges related to uneven implementation, policy instability, and the risk of superficial compliance when equity tools are not embedded in sustained learning structures.*

*The paper argues that policy alone is insufficient to drive equitable change and that improvement work must be intentionally designed to surface structural inequities and elevate practitioner and student voice. By examining the Catalyst Inquiry Community Model, this study offers insight into how equity-centered improvement communities can support educators in translating policy intent into practice. Implications are offered for educators, leaders, policymakers, and researchers seeking to align equity policy, collaborative inquiry, and systemic efforts to improve student belonging.*

**Keywords:** equity-centered policy, student belonging, culturally relevant and sustaining education, continuous improvement, structural inequity, practitioner voice, collaborative inquiry, implementation challenges, educational equity, systemic change

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**Introduction**

In our work supporting school leaders and teams around equity and student belonging, one question keeps coming up: How do we move from intention to action—especially when it comes to building environments where all students truly feel like they belong? This white paper explores one way forward: using continuous improvement practices as a way to bring the Pennsylvania Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) competencies into day-to-day school improvement work. We've seen firsthand how powerful these competencies can be, but we've also seen that they don't translate automatically into practice. Through the lens of our Equity in Student Belonging Inquiry Community, we explore how teams are beginning to interpret, integrate, and act on this policy as part of their improvement journeys.

We lift up the moments of insight, challenge, and transformation that emerged when practitioners were given time, space, and structure to dig into CR-SE through the familiar rhythms of inquiry cycles. This paper shares what we learned, why it matters, and what others can take away from our process. After setting the stage with some grounding in the literature on belonging, equity-centered improvement, our Catalyst model, and the history of CR-SE, we share findings from the field and close with implications for leaders, policymakers, and anyone trying to lead for equity in schools.

**Research Questions**

- **Research Question 1:** How do inquiry community participants interpret the PA CR-SE competencies and incorporate

them into their inquiry practices for supporting equitable student belonging in schools?

- **Research Question 2a:** What policy and practice shifts do schools make to address inequalities in student belonging?
- **Research Question 2b:** How do school-based practitioners describe the influence of the CR-SE competencies on these shifts?

**Rationale for the Study**

The findings will support other educational leaders and improvement communities seeking to integrate PA's CR-SE competencies, or similar tools from research and policy, into existing inquiry and development structures. Specifically, this work aims to inform how equity-centered policy tools like CR-SE can shape change management strategies, deepen inquiry practice, and drive systems-level transformation toward greater belonging.

**Conceptual Framing: Belonging, Power, and Equity-Centered Improvement***Student Belonging as a Structural and Political Concern*

Student belonging is widely recognized as foundational to students' academic engagement, well-being, and long-term success (Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Slaten et al., 2016). To date much of the literature and practice related to belonging has framed it primarily as an individual psychological experience rather than as a condition shaped by identity, institutional practices, and power. In this paper, we adopt a critical conceptualization of belonging that understands it

as relational, dynamic, and produced within social and organizational systems.

From this perspective, belonging reflects whether students are recognized, valued, and positioned as legitimate participants in school communities. Students' experiences of belonging are shaped by intersecting social identities and by institutional norms, routines, and policies that determine inclusion and exclusion (Sumption & Wong, 2011; Kuttner, 2023). Because schools operate within broader social, political, and historical contexts, belonging is inseparable from questions of equity and justice. This framing positions belonging not as a neutral outcome, but as a political condition that reflects whose identities, knowledge, and experiences are affirmed in educational spaces (Kuttner, 2023).

This understanding shifts attention away from solely measuring student perceptions of belonging and toward examining the organizational and systemic conditions that make belonging possible. It also underscores the role of adult decision-making, leadership practices, and policy contexts in shaping how belonging is experienced by different groups of students. Improving belonging therefore requires interrogating not only student outcomes, but also the structures and practices that reproduce inequitable experiences in schools.

#### *Cultural Relevance, Policy, and Structural Inequity*

Culturally relevant and sustaining approaches to education provide an important bridge between students' lived experiences and the institutional conditions that shape belonging. By centering students' cultural identities and community knowledge as assets, these approaches challenge dominant norms that have historically marginalized students of color and other minoritized groups (Kuttner, 2023; Ross & Malone, 2024). Within this framing, belonging is not about assimilation into existing systems, but about transforming those systems to better reflect and serve diverse communities.

Policy tools such as Pennsylvania's Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education competencies have the potential to support this work by offering shared language and institutional

legitimacy for equity-oriented practice. Policy alone does not produce meaningful change. How educators interpret, prioritize, and enact policy is shaped by local context, leadership commitments, professional learning structures, and broader political conditions. Without explicit attention to power and inequity, equity-focused policies risk being implemented superficially or reduced to compliance-oriented activities.

In this study, we examine how educators engaged with the CR-SE competencies as a guidepost for inquiry into student belonging. Rather than treating the competencies as a checklist, participants described using them to frame questions about responsibility, institutional practice, and systemic barriers to belonging. This framing highlights the interconnectedness of cultural relevance, policy, and structural inequity, and underscores the need for learning structures that support educators in translating policy intent into sustained, equity-centered action.

#### *Continuous Improvement and Its Equity Limitations*

Continuous improvement has emerged as a promising approach for addressing complex problems in education through disciplined inquiry, iterative testing, and collaborative learning (Bryk et al., 2015; Gallagher & Cottingham, 2019). Networked approaches to improvement are particularly well suited for generating context-sensitive knowledge and supporting collective learning across organizations (Russell et al., 2017; Andreoli & Klar, 2021). These features make continuous improvement an appealing strategy for addressing inequities in student belonging.

At the same time, continuous improvement is not inherently oriented toward equity or justice. Traditional improvement approaches often emphasize technical problem solving, efficiency, and measurable outcomes without fully examining how historical and structural inequities shape educational systems (Capper, 2018; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Valdez et al., 2020). When issues of power, marginalization, and identity are treated as secondary concerns, improvement efforts can unintentionally reinforce dominant norms and reproduce existing inequities.

Critiques of improvement science in education note that commonly used tools such as root cause analysis, data disaggregation, and iterative cycles can obscure systemic inequities if applied without a critical lens (LeMahieu & Haynes, 2022). For example, focusing on outcomes without interrogating the systems that produce them can lead to interventions that address surface-level symptoms rather than underlying causes. Similarly, collaborative improvement spaces that do not attend to relational power may limit whose voices shape problem definitions and solutions.

### *Reframing Improvement as Critical and Collaborative*

In response to these limitations, scholars have increasingly called for equity-centered and critically oriented approaches to continuous improvement that foreground power, historical context, and the voices of those most impacted by inequitable systems (Anderson et al., 2023; Eddy-Spicer, 2023; Perlman et al., 2025). These approaches position improvement not only as a technical process, but as an adaptive and relational endeavor that requires critical reflection, humility, and sustained attention to justice.

Within this framing, improvement work demands learning environments that support psychological safety, relational trust, and meaningful participation across roles and identities (Dixon & Palmer, 2020; Gallagher & Cottingham, 2019). Educators must be supported to question taken-for-granted assumptions, surface inequities embedded in practice and engage in disciplined inquiry that centers belonging as a collective responsibility rather than an individual trait.

### *The Catalyst Inquiry Community Model*

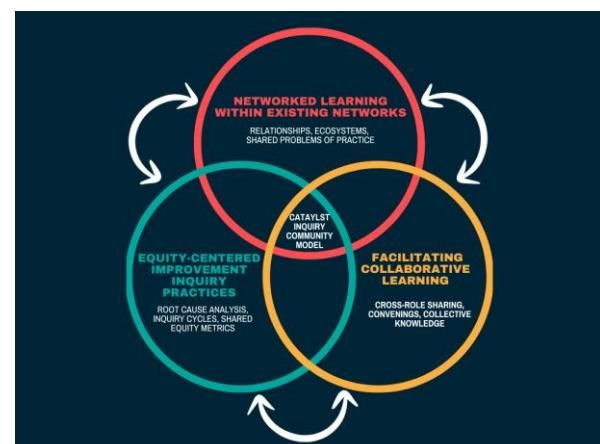
The Catalyst Inquiry Community Model reflects this reframing by integrating critical conceptualizations of belonging with equity-centered improvement practices. The model situates improvement within existing relational networks, prioritizes inquiry into structural causes of inequity, and intentionally designs collaborative learning spaces that elevate diverse perspectives. In doing so, it leverages the strengths of continuous improvement while directly addressing its

limitations, offering a framework for advancing student belonging as a matter of equity and justice rather than compliance or individual disposition. It integrates:

- **Networked Learning Within Authentic Relationships:** Building on existing partnerships, the model organizes teams around real problems of practice and cultivates sustained, context-responsive collaboration.
- **Equity-Centered Inquiry Practices:** Root cause analysis, iterative testing, and data use are paired with structural analyses of inequity, guiding teams to surface and challenge systemic drivers of marginalization.
- **Collaborative Learning Structures:** Regular convenings (virtual and in-person) foster shared reflection, artifact review, and cross-context learning—ensuring that local wisdom is elevated and diffused.

This model (Figure 1) prioritizes integrating technical tools of improvement science with the adaptive work of building shared language, trust, and critical awareness. In doing so, it supports school teams in transforming not only what they do, but how they think about equity, power, and possibility inside their systems. By integrating the CR-SE standards, the Catalyst model offers a powerful avenue for aligning state policy, practitioner learning, and systemic transformation.

*Figure 1: Inquiry Community Model*



Source: MacDonald et al., *In Press*

## Study Overview

### *Context*

At Catalyst @ Penn GSE, Penn's center for global education innovation, we have worked for the last decade on developing and disseminating best practices in education, particularly through convening communities of educators who are confronting shared challenges. One specific program within this center, Inquiries with Practitioners, has emphasized building capacity with the mindsets, tools, and methodology of improvement science among teams from nearby school districts and creating regular opportunities for these teams to convene and share insights about strategies that have helped them successfully address focal problems of practice.

The most established Inquiry Community in this program focuses on equity in student belonging. District teams—comprised of students, teachers, school leaders, and administrators—use data from the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) survey to identify and address belonging inequities through inquiry cycles. Nearly 30 schools and districts, primarily in southeastern Pennsylvania, have participated over the past six years.

In the 2024-25 school year, Catalyst integrated the CR-SE competencies into this inquiry community's programming to help participating educators reflect on the cultural relevance and equity implications of their belonging initiatives. These competencies, which were approved in 2022 by the Pennsylvania State Board of Education as required content in new teacher education programs and ongoing teacher professional development, had been broadly implemented across PA school districts in the preceding school year. Several members of the belonging inquiry community were also active participants in an advocacy group that supported the development and enactment of the CR-SE policy.

Midway through the 2024-25 school year, the state withdrew the policy in response to a lawsuit and replaced it with the Common Ground framework. This new framework included modified language for the CR-SE competencies—

now called Cultural Awareness competencies; added competencies around trauma awareness and technological engagement; and removed the requirement that school districts incorporate these competencies in teacher training. While Catalyst's inquiry community programming adopted this shift in language to reflect the new state policy, we refer primarily to CR-SE competencies throughout this report as these were most familiar to, and most frequently referenced by, participants in this study.

## Methods

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative action research design to examine how educational leaders interpreted and enacted Pennsylvania's Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) competencies within an established equity-focused inquiry community. Action research aligned with the goals of the Equity in Student Belonging Inquiry Community, which emphasizes practitioner learning, collective sensemaking, and iterative improvement embedded in authentic school contexts. This approach enabled us to examine both how participants made meaning of the policy and how those interpretations shaped inquiry practices, policies, and efforts to improve student belonging.

The study focused on two related dimensions: (a) the processes of the inquiry community, including collaboration, learning routines, and use of improvement tools; and (b) the outcomes of participation, such as shifts in policy, practice, or leadership approaches related to equitable student belonging.

### *Context and Data Sources*

Data were collected within Catalyst @ Penn GSE's Equity in Student Belonging Inquiry Community during the 2024-25 school year, when CR-SE competencies were intentionally integrated into community programming. Midway through the year, the state replaced the CR-SE competencies with the Common Ground framework, creating a natural opportunity to examine how participants navigated policy change

while sustaining equity-oriented improvement work.

Three data sources were used:

- Observations of four inquiry community meetings,
- Semi-structured interviews with current and former community members, and
- Artifacts generated through inquiry work (e.g., improvement plans, professional learning materials, documentation of policy or practice shifts).

These sources allowed for triangulation across participant perspectives, observed practice, and material evidence of change.

#### *Participants and Sampling*

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure alignment with the research questions. Eligible participants were current or former members of the inquiry community who had engaged directly in inquiry work related to student belonging and the CR-SE competencies.

Ten participants completed interviews. Of these, five were active members during the study year and five had participated in earlier cohorts. Participants were evenly split between building-based and district- or intermediate unit-level leadership roles. All had extensive professional experience (approximately 20–35 years in education), and nearly all had served in leadership roles for more than a decade. Nine participants worked in suburban districts, and one worked in a rural district. Several participants had connections to the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium and familiarity with the development of the CR-SE policy.

This sample reflects the composition of the inquiry community and offered deep insight into experienced leaders' engagement with equity-focused policy. The concentration of senior leaders from predominantly suburban contexts limits the representativeness of the sample and the transferability of findings to urban, rural, or less-resourced settings, as well as to educators earlier in their careers.

#### *Data Collection*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and May 2025. Due to lower-than-anticipated community enrollment and resulting timeline adjustments, the research team revised the original plan of two interviews per participant to one in-depth interview per participant. Interview questions focused on participants' experiences in the inquiry community, interpretations of the CR-SE competencies, perceived influence on inquiry practices and decision-making, and responses to the mid-year policy shift. Interview protocols were updated following the policy change to explicitly address how participants made sense of and adapted to the revised framework.

Observations of inquiry community meetings focused on how participants engaged with equity, belonging, and policy language; how inquiry tools were used collaboratively; and how sensemaking unfolded in group contexts. Artifacts were collected to provide additional evidence of how ideas discussed in the community were translated into practice.

#### *Analytic Approach*

Interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed collaboratively by a team of four researchers using an iterative coding process. The team began with provisional deductive codes aligned to the research questions and core constructs of equity-centered improvement. These codes were refined through multiple rounds of coding and discussion, supported by a shared codebook to promote analytic consistency.

Inductive and *in vivo* coding were incorporated to capture participants' language and surface unanticipated themes. Researchers documented analytic memos throughout the process, which informed team discussions and theme development. Data from interviews, observations, and artifacts were triangulated to identify patterns and strengthen interpretive claims.

#### *Trustworthiness and Limitations*

Several strategies were used to support trustworthiness, including triangulation across data

sources, collaborative coding, reflexive memoing, and informal member checks with participants to validate emerging interpretations. The research team's dual role as facilitators of inquiry communities provided deep contextual insight while also necessitating ongoing reflexivity regarding assumptions and positionality.

Findings are not intended to be generalizable but rather to offer analytic insights that may be transferable to similar contexts. Readers are encouraged to consider how local conditions, such as leadership experience, district context, and political environment, shape the applicability of these findings to their own settings.

## Findings

### Research Question 1

Educators in Pennsylvania are engaging with the state's Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE) competencies to make equity work more tangible, grounded, and sustainable. These competencies can promote belonging, equity, and inclusion in classrooms by offering shared language, legitimizing local efforts, and guiding professional practice. Drawing on insights from inquiry community participants, this section outlines how practitioners are interpreting and applying the CR-SE competencies in their schools. Three major themes emerged:

- Shared language and clarity
- Collective authority and accountability
- The realities of implementation

### Clarity Through Shared Language

Educators consistently praised the competencies for giving structure and shared terminology to work that is often misunderstood or emotionally charged.

#### Why it matters:

- Equity efforts can be vague, poorly informed, or based on individual instincts.

- A structured framework helps unify purpose and language across teams and districts.

#### What participants said:

- "The competencies... provide clarity for administrators to understand what it is that we're targeting and why we're targeting this."
- "This gave a nice way to clearly develop a path—not just somebody's instinct and feelings, but a structure thoughtfully designed by the state."
- "Providing that common language... really does help to spread those stories."
- "It helps you break it down more and isolate learning more. It's more of a usable framework."

The competencies also provided educators with tools to navigate difficult conversations, support students during national and global events, and plan more inclusive curriculum and training. Several leaders noted how CR-SE helped avoid the pitfalls of poorly designed or disconnected equity trainings in the past.

#### Building Collective Accountability

Beyond clarity, participants emphasized the value of CR-SE in shifting responsibility from individuals to institutions. The standards offered justification for equity work and increased legitimacy in the eyes of colleagues, parents, and school boards.

#### Key benefits:

- Moved the work beyond personal agendas.
- Helped leaders respond to pushback by citing state priorities.
- Encouraged system-wide participation.

#### What participants said:

- "It becomes a lot more meaningful than, 'We're doing this because [a district leader] said it's a good idea.'"

- “It eliminates the invitation. It makes it an expectation.”
- “It gives you more armor when you go out in your community... when someone asks, ‘Why are we doing this?’ you can point to the standards.”
- “We can say that we’re equity-minded, but we need to make sure that we’re diving deeper into what that means... and hold ourselves accountable in the work.”

The competencies also reinforced accountability, not just inspiration. Leaders used them to:

- Justify and structure professional development days.
- Guide curriculum decisions and instructional planning.
- Set expectations for certification and ongoing educator learning.

However, educators warned that when the standards were optional or unclear, some districts could choose not to engage at all—especially in politically sensitive contexts or when resources were tight. In such cases, policy clarity and external accountability became even more critical.

*Translating Policy into Practice: Complex, Uneven, Ongoing*

Educators acknowledged a gap between policy intent and consistent day-to-day application. Implementation often depended on local leadership, staff readiness, and time.

***Common practices:***

- Using CR-SE as a reference point or guidepost, not a strict checklist.
- Embedding equity goals into existing PD and school culture efforts.
- Designing aligned curricula and student experiences over time.

***What participants said:***

- “We’ve been doing this work... it feels like it’s getting richer.”

- “It’s essential learning as a prerequisite to really dig into belonging.”
- “They help funnel down and link it to specific outcomes.”
- “I don’t reference the Common Ground framework. I had to pull it up to even remember what it is.”

Yet, several participants expressed confusion or concern about the rollout and use of the competencies:

- Some, particularly building leaders, had never formally been introduced to them.
- Others saw them used inconsistently or expressed concern that the policy became less impactful when replaced by the broader, less specific Common Ground framework.
- A few noted that without deeper engagement, the work risked becoming a box to check or another buzzword.

One participant summed up concerns about the recent, more limited direction of the policy: “It’s not going to get us to those places—the deep, reflective self-analysis of educational practice.”

*Educator Perceptions and Student Reactions*

Despite varying degrees of familiarity with the policy, educators generally saw the CR-SE competencies as aligned with their district priorities and community goals.

**Positive perceptions:**

- “I was a big fan of the CR-SE standards... well done and thoughtful.”
- “We’ve used the competencies in a lot of our grounding work.”
- “They align with our efforts around belonging and inclusion.”

**Critiques and tensions:**

- Some participants described the shift from CR-SE to Common Ground as “rudimentary” or “stripped down.”
- Others noted that without proper implementation, the competencies could lose power and relevance.

Across interviews, participants made clear that the CR-SE competencies are not just a document. When supported and embedded meaningfully, they provide the structure, language, and legitimacy needed to drive equitable practices in schools. Policy alone cannot transform school culture. Educators need time, space, and leadership support to:

- Align professional development with CR-SE goals.
- Center student voice and belonging.
- Move beyond performative practices toward deeper transformation.

**Research Question 2**

As part of this project, we also explored the concrete strategies that educators used to make student belonging more equitable in their contexts, and the role that both continuous improvement practices and policy like the CR-SE competencies played in their use of these strategies. Participants' reflections offered valuable insight into how educators and their student collaborators approach the complex work of supporting student belonging. They also revealed dynamics of the interplay between new state education policy and existing work to make schools more equitable and inclusive spaces. Themes across these reflections included:

- Educators' ongoing commitment to developing cultural competence
- The value of continuous improvement in supporting student belonging
- The role of personal and political context in shaping educator priorities and policy implementation

**Educator Commitment to Improving Cultural Competence**

Participants pointed to a wide range of work they had engaged in to cultivate cultural competence in their schools to improve student belonging. While some of this work was guided by the CR-SE policy, participants noted it had long been a priority before the policy's adoption—and would remain so, regardless of state requirements. As one participant noted: “We know what we need to do to provide equity for all students, and we know what we have to do to ensure that we hold ourselves accountable, too.”

***Examples of practices to improve student belonging:***

- Providing professional development for teachers focused on cultivating respect and high expectations for all learners.
- Supporting middle school students in selecting books with main characters that represent wide-ranging social identities and diverse authorship to read with elementary students to frame conversations with their younger peers about difference and belonging.
- Highlighting a set number of lessons about key African American historical figures that teachers could draw from, and then helping teachers identify organic opportunities across content areas to integrate and uplift these examples, rather than presenting this content in isolated, one-off lessons that feel disconnected from the rest of students' learning.
- Creating opportunities for high school students to peer mentor middle school students through sharing information about the transition to high school, and to explicitly invite middle schoolers to join affinity groups or clubs so that they have peer connections upon transitioning to high school.

**What participants said:**

- “I think the major variable of cultural competencies that we're focusing on is really authentic connections. We've really been diving deeply into that with our faculty who has been making some really great strides and then also incorporating themselves in hosting a number of clubs.”
- “The more dialogue we do with the staff, the wider their lens gets to create spaces where kids feel like they belong so that we're not putting up barriers intentionally, unintentionally to keep people out.”
- “Even without having the Common Ground framework or CR-SE competencies, there was work there, whether we're looking at Donna Hicks or looking at Krownapple and Cobb, a lot of research and work around the importance of belonging and inclusion and also the importance of that in academic success for students.”

*Table 1. Continuous Improvement Practices Used in Context*

<p>Disaggregating Data to Illuminate Inequities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collecting demographic information as part of survey administration, and looking at discrepancies between social identity groups in survey responses</li> <li>• Spending time identifying and understanding root causes of problems</li> <li>• Using different kinds of data (surveys, focus groups, lived experience) to understand a challenge</li> </ul>	<p><i>If we can disaggregate that and look for patterns or barriers [...] for example, if we look at the disproportion and impact and begin to take that same framework that we would apply to that survey data and use that in all of our spaces that we apply and look at data at school [...] and assess for trends in community, but also then to have the language to be able to talk about potential bias, to be able to talk about cultural impacts [...] to bring that into the conversation, I think is critical.”</i></p>
<p>Using Inquiry Cycles to Advance Equity-Oriented Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determining discrete, bite-sized ideas to test in order to see the potential impact of larger strategic plans</li> <li>• Trying out a similar idea in different contexts (e.g. different classrooms, different school sites) to be able to share insights about their use in action across different contexts</li> </ul>	<p><i>“It seems like a big problem, but applying the framework to that small cycle of change, how can we look at this at the classroom level? Is there something about the way that I am working with particular students that maybe unintentionally, intentionally—I don't even know the impact that these things are having—that could drive how they feel in a space?”</i></p>
<p>Engaging Diverse Stakeholders in Communities of Practice to Understand &amp; Address Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporating student members in inquiry teams to interpret &amp; develop data-driven plans</li> <li>• Connecting stakeholders across roles in a school</li> <li>• Engaging with other districts who are doing similar work to hear about their strategies and results</li> </ul>	<p><i>“It grows my perspective to hear of other items that the local school districts are trying to tackle. It gives us a broadening. Plus, it's also invigorating to see other schools incorporate their students and amplify their voices and their feedback.”</i></p>

A strategy that many participants named was efforts to improve belonging by cultivating cultural engaging student leaders to help design and lead competence. This shared practice, along with the

group's general expression of commitment to improving cultural competence, likely reflected participants' shared connection to the research as members of a student belonging-focused inquiry community.

### *The Value of Continuous Improvement in Culturally Sustaining Belonging Work*

Participants shared examples of how they use continuous improvement practices to support belonging and improve cultural competence. These examples offer concrete strategies for other educators interested in engaging in this work. They described how the CR-SE competencies complement a continuous improvement approach: the competencies help frame key questions and focus areas for improvement, and continuous improvement practices offer clear steps to investigate these questions using data and stakeholder input.

### **The Role of Context in Policy Implementation**

It was clear across participants' reflections that personal, professional, and community context played a significant role in how they used the CR-SE competencies and what strategies they adopted to improve toward these objectives. Many noted that their commitment to incorporating the competencies in their work stemmed from a pre-existing commitment to improve cultural competence rooted in their own social identities or their professional role.

Others suggested that without this pre-existing commitment, or a school community who had already embraced the value of this work, it would be likely that strategies to improve cultural competence would be sidelined or "watered down." In this sense, the context of the local community and the district's leadership had a significant impact on whether the policy was thoughtfully implemented or treated as a checklist item that could be deprioritized. As one participant stated: "It becomes very easy for people that are less comfortable navigating that space to water down efforts that are happening."

### **What participants said:**

- "I think it's important for schools to be focused on these competencies. But again, my perspective is one of a social worker. So I value these things."
- "Personally, as a black woman, I feel like it's very important for everybody [...] when [...] you predominantly have white people in education, and you got all kinds of kids [...] for there to be some awareness and some empathy and some understanding and some action in order to help kids be successful."
- "I would say that our work, the forward movement of our work, is isolated really to [our county]. And I would also say, within certain districts within [our county] [...] On a monthly basis, I'm in spaces and having dialogue and conversation with representation across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. And to say that the understanding varies, the approach varies, and the priority of this work varies, would be a gross understatement."

### **Recommendations for Educators**

#### *Use CR-SE as a Guidepost, not a Checklist*

Leverage the CR-SE competencies or similar policy tools as a foundation to design inclusive practices and responsive instruction, rather than treating them as a compliance measure. Teachers should explore the competencies to frame essential questions: "Whose stories are being centered? Who feels like they belong in this space?"

#### *Use Structured Tools and Collaborative Dialogue to Support Reflection on Practice*

Educators emphasized how structured frameworks, such as the CR-SE competencies, helped ground their practice and guide critical reflection. Tools like the competencies, the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) survey, and Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles offer ways to collect data, interrogate inequities, and make more informed decisions

about belonging. When paired with facilitated dialogue and collaborative inquiry, particularly within a diverse group of collaborators, these tools enable educators to engage in deeper reflection, promoting meaningful shifts in mindsets and classroom practice.

#### *Elevate Student Voice in Instructional Planning*

Create consistent structures for student input—surveys, focus groups, or co-designed projects—to inform how curriculum, school policies, and classroom experiences are shaped. This is particularly critical when engaging with current social and political events that impact students' experiences in the classroom.

### **Recommendations for School and District Leaders**

#### *Leverage Tools from Policy and Research to Build Shared Language and Expectations*

Identify frameworks and other resources that can shape shared understanding of equity and belonging—either from policies like CR-SE or existing research—to provide a foundation for professional learning, coaching, and school improvement planning. Several participants emphasized the importance of common language to facilitate collaboration, lend authority to their work, and anchor the work across contexts.

#### *Build Capacity Across a System to Use Improvement Practices to Localize Belonging Work*

Support school teams in using PDSA cycles and root cause analysis to apply the CR-SE competencies or similar tools in their unique contexts. Data disaggregation by student identity groups, paired with cycles of implementation and reflection, can reveal actionable gaps and guide targeted shifts.

#### *Elevate Student and Community Voice in Decision-Making*

Participants emphasized that equity and belonging efforts gain power when they center student and family perspectives. This includes integrating feedback from student panels, climate

surveys, and culturally responsive outreach. Leaders can build trust and improve responsiveness to their community's needs by embedding student and community voice in decisions and inquiry cycles.

#### *Creatively Adapt Resources to Best Serve Your Populations*

District teams shared that local implementation required adapting existing PD structures and improvement plans to reflect CR-SE principles, especially in contexts where resources were constrained. Rather than seeing equity efforts as a new initiative, many aligned the competencies with work already underway. One participant noted, "It's a lens and a paradigm shift... If you make people do it, for some it will be a check mark—opposed to real understanding and integration." Leaders should look for ways to infuse this lens into current systems, not silo it.

### **Recommendations for Policymakers and Researchers**

#### *Support Clear Policy Mandates and Communication*

Participants consistently indicated that vague or optional guidelines risk marginalizing equity work. To the extent possible, it is essential to layer requirements such as the CR-SE competencies into program or certification requirements, school improvement planning guidance, and evaluation processes to support stronger implementation. As one participant stated, "If it's not mandated or clear, then schools in survival mode will let it fall off the priority list."

#### *Create Communities of Practice that Facilitate Resource Sharing and Learning*

Collaboration in cross-role, cross-context communities of practice gave participants dedicated time to focus on belonging and cultural competence, while also deepening their understanding of how to improve student belonging and advance equity. Shifting from one-time trainings to ongoing learning communities and investing in networks that use tools like the CR-SE competencies for sustained, collaborative inquiry has strong potential to help districts translate policy into meaningful change.

## Center Community and Cultural Relevance in Metrics and Research

Policymakers and researchers should prioritize the input of students, educators, and community members when designing and evaluating efforts to improve belonging and cultural relevance in schools. Providing concrete examples of equity-focused data practices, such as disaggregating by social identity and combining qualitative with quantitative insights, can help educators design stronger strategies. Equally important, policymakers and researchers must support schools in developing action plans to respond to what the data reveals. Without such responsiveness, even well-intended tools can lose trust and impact.

## Closing Thought

Educators across Pennsylvania have demonstrated that when given space, structure, and support, they can make significant strides in equity and student belonging. While not stand-alone solutions, the CR-SE competencies become powerful tools for sustainable change when paired with strong local leadership and integrated into the work of improvement communities. As one participant aptly put it: “We have a lot of work to do, and we still have a lot that’s missing. But I’m glad that something is being done. We’re starting somewhere.”

Let us continue building on that start—together, across classrooms, schools, and policy systems. To learn more about Catalyst’s Inquiry communities, visit:

<https://www.gse.upenn.edu/our-expertise/inquiries-practitioners>

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