A Qualitative Study of Student-Centered Learning Practices in New England High Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Background and Purpose

In early 2015, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) contracted with the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) to conduct a qualitative study examining the implementation of student-centered learning (SCL) practices in select public high schools in New England. This study extends lines of inquiry explored through a prior (2014) project that UMDI conducted for NMEF. The 2014 study employed survey methodology to examine the prevalence of student-centered practices in public high schools across New England. The present study builds upon the investigation, using a variety of qualitative methods to further probe the richness and complexity of SCL approaches in use across the region. Specifically, this study was designed to address what student-centered practices “look like” in an array of contexts. The study also addresses the perceived impacts that SCL approaches have on students, staff, and schools. Additionally, it highlights the broad array of factors within and beyond school walls that reportedly foster and challenge the implementation of SCL practices. This study seeks to help NMEF understand the intricacies of SCL and provides strategic considerations for how Nellie Mae can promote the adoption and development of student-centered practices in the region.

Nellie Mae organizes student-centered learning by four tenets: (1) learning is personalized; (2) learning is competency-based; (3) learning takes place anytime, anywhere; and (4) students take ownership.¹

¹ http://www.nmefoundation.org/our-vision
Specifically, the study addresses five research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of student-centered practices in relation to the four SCL tenets? How are SCL approaches implemented?

2. What are the salient contextual factors (e.g., systems, structures, policies, procedures) associated with the implementation of SCL practices? How do they support, impede, and otherwise shape the adoption, development, and implementation of SCL approaches?

3. How are schools with moderate and high levels of SCL implementation organized to foster SCL practices? What mechanisms are in place to promote student-centered learning?

4. What is the role of SCL approaches in schools and classrooms? In what ways, if at all, are they embedded in the goals and practices of schools and classrooms?

5. What is the quality of SCL instructional practices in study schools? What relationships, if any, do administrators and educators perceive between these approaches and student learning?

Methodology

The study targeted public New England high schools with robust implementation of student-centered practices. The sample frame for the study consisted of 367 New England public high schools, charter schools, and Massachusetts Innovation Schools that completed the SCL principal survey administered by UMDI in 2014, as well as three schools that did not take the survey, but were identified by NMEF as potentially having robust student-centered practices. Sampling methods were employed to ensure that schools in the present study reflected diversity in terms of geography (state), school size, socioeconomic status, and school type (e.g., charter/non-charter). In total, there were 73 schools in the sample. Study invitations and overviews were sent to all 73 schools to gauge their interest in study participation and 18 schools expressed interest in the study. Subsequently, 12 schools were selected for participation in consultation with NMEF based on SCL score, state, size, poverty level, and school type.

Initial interviews were conducted with principals from the 12 selected schools and the district superintendents that oversee them. Data from these interviews were then analyzed to gauge the prevalence of student-centered practices in place at each school. UMDI, in consultation with NMEF, selected six schools for site visits based on the reported degree of SCL practices in place and the aforementioned variables of interest.

Day-long site visits were conducted by two UMDI staff members at the six site visit schools. These consisted of semi-structured interviews with school leaders and department heads, teacher focus groups, and classroom observations. A classroom observation tool was developed by UMDI, with guidance from NMEF, to provide field-based examples of practice. Semi-structured debriefing sessions were conducted with observed teachers.

Analysis consisted of reviewing and summarizing all field notes, completed classroom observation tools, and audio recordings from initial interviews and site visits. These summaries were then coded, sorting data and initial gleanings into categories. The coding process triangulated data across sites. Analytic memos were generated to capture emerging patterns and themes in the data. A team of two researchers reviewed all memos, codes, and the data and notes within them to identify key findings. These findings, and evidence to support them, are presented in this report.
Overview of Findings

Above all else, student-centered learning at study schools is a work in progress. Each school has its own vision for incorporating student-centered approaches and each has implemented SCL practices in its own fashion. At all study schools, administrators identified an array of supports and constraints that affect the development of SCL approaches. While some schools have made more progress than others in working toward their goals regarding student-centered learning, leaders at all study schools express a desire to become more student-centered and improve SCL practices in place.

In general, teachers perceived value in practices within the learning is personalized and students take ownership tenets. There were relatively few obstacles to implementing practices within these areas. These tenets were more prevalent in study schools than anytime/anywhere and competency-based approaches.

A variety of factors enable study schools to implement effective and robust SCL practices.

- All study charter schools (including one Massachusetts Innovation School, which enjoys many of the autonomies associated with charter schools) were founded with a strong commitment to student-centered learning, as reflected by their missions, policies, and practices. They benefitted from not having to transition from a pre-existing educational framework.

- The strategic use of staffing structures plays a critical role in fostering student-centered practices within study schools. Common planning time, distributed leadership, and targeted professional development help teachers improve and expand their student-centered pedagogical methods and influence the evolution of school culture.
• The study found that state- and district-level policies, specifically with respect to student learning progressions, pathways, and assessment may create opportunities for schools to expand or deepen their SCL approaches.

• Interviewees suggested that granting schools autonomy can foster SCL, while the introduction of competing priorities may divert attention away from SCL and slow the implementation of student-centered practices.

Study schools encounter a range of barriers to implementing student-centered approaches.

• Schools tended to report that the adoption of competency-based learning (CBE) models is more challenging than implementation of other tenets. Educators and leaders face considerable barriers to successful implementation, such as expectations that students will advance at the end of each school year and community concerns regarding colleges’ views of competency-based transcripts.

• Every site visit school implemented a unique competency-based learning system. The lack of a proven competency-based model challenges schools to invent their own approach.

• Anytime/anywhere learning practices lag behind the other SCL tenets. Teachers and administrators face an array of challenges to implementing approaches within this tenet such as establishing community partnerships, transportation, and budget. Some schools appear not to realize the full educational potential of such practices.

• In contrast to study charter schools, all of the traditional high schools in the study operated for decades in conventional educational frameworks before beginning to embrace student-centered practices. Respondents at every traditional site visit school expressed that shifting toward a vision of student-centered learning prompted pushback from an array of constituents.

• While districts and state legislators can positively affect the adoption and development of student-centered practices, these entities can impede SCL as well. Multiple and competing initiatives imposed by states and districts can distract from schools’ focus on an SCL agenda and consume valuable time and other resources.

• Respondents identified important challenges to teaching in a student-centered environment, such as the additional time needed for planning and preparation relative to traditional instructional methods. Further, many interviewees said that teaching in a student-centered classroom requires instructors to become familiar with new pedagogical methods and reconceive their role as teachers.

• There was consensus among many teachers that instruction in a student-centered classroom takes longer than in a conventional learning environment. Many teachers opt to use conventional teaching methods at times due to the pressure to teach students the content required for standardized tests and Advanced Placement exams.

Overall, teachers and administrators in study schools demonstrated a desire to produce learners with strong 21st-century skills, who are empowered to pursue their own interests and successes, and who are engaged in their communities. Some study schools exhibited an explicit orientation toward social justice. They address social and political issues such as privilege and representation in their curricula, and view their school community as a model for the establishment of equitable relationships and open, authentic communication.

In regard to the possible relationships between student-centered approaches and student learning, many staff members at study schools posited that SCL approaches have a positive influence on student engagement. Respondents also typically expressed a belief that SCL practices facilitate deep learning that is relevant and meaningful for students.
**Strategic Considerations**

NMEF aims to foster student-centered approaches in high schools across New England. This study suggests that several potential strategies to accomplishing this goal may warrant consideration.

The study’s key message is that SCL is widely acknowledged to be a work in progress. Schools follow various trajectories in the process of adopting and implementing SCL approaches, but no school reported having accomplished all of its goals in this regard. The study suggests that educators are eager to learn from their colleagues in the field. Further efforts to understand the rich diversity of experiences and identify barriers, supports, and promising solutions may yield important lessons for schools and districts.

Instructional practices at charter schools merit closer investigation. The charter model might represent a unique opportunity to expand the role of SCL practices in public education, and efforts to foster dialogue between professionals associated with charter and traditional schools may produce rich insights and expansion of student-centered approaches in both contexts.

School and district leaders in multiple states remarked that state policies have been a catalyst in pushing them to adopt new student-centered practices. In this light, continued and expanded dissemination of supportive policies may help to normalize progressive pedagogical methods, in turn fostering acceptance of these practices among a broad range of constituents. Additionally, strengthened communication between legislators and school leaders may reinforce each party’s understanding of the salient policy and practical considerations that drive decisions. For example, some respondents indicated
a need to help state leaders understand that schools experience challenges when legislators simultaneously change policy on multiple fronts.

While progress has been achieved in some aspects of SCL implementation, findings suggest that concerns prevail regarding competency-based learning systems. In particular, some study schools and parents are afraid that reporting competency-based grades to colleges may adversely affect students’ prospects in the college admissions process. In fact, numerous principals expressed reluctance to implement competency-based grading systems because of pushback from parents, or even the fear of such resistance. The study suggests that in order for competency-based learning practices to gain traction in New England public high schools, parents will need to understand and support them, and colleges must allay concerns that competency-based report cards will work against students in the admissions process. Promoting broad dialogue between colleges and high schools using competency-based grades may increase understanding for all parties, and may prompt colleges to articulate more clearly how they interpret competency-based transcripts.
The Nellie Mae Education Foundation is the largest philanthropic organization in New England that focuses exclusively on education. The Foundation supports the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches to learning at the high school level across New England—where learning is personalized; learning is competency-based; learning takes place anytime, anywhere; and students exert ownership over their own learning. To elevate student-centered approaches, the Foundation utilizes a four-part strategy that focuses on: building educator ownership, understanding and capacity; advancing quality and rigor of SCL practices; developing effective systems designs; and building public understanding and demand. Since 1998, the Foundation has distributed over $210 million in grants.

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