

LEAD  
BY LEARNING

Understand learning. Improve teaching. Build leadership.  
Mills College at Northeastern University

# ANNUAL REPORT



**N** Northeastern University  
Mills College

[www.weleadbylearning.org](http://www.weleadbylearning.org)

# 2023-2024



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# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Since our founding in 2008, Lead by Learning has been grounded in this belief: If we want to improve students' day-to-day experiences, we must build the capacity of those best positioned to understand and address students' needs—the educators and leaders who work with them daily.

In my experience, most people agree with this idea. Where I see divergence is in the “how.”

Lead by Learning believes the “how” requires deep learning and collaborative inquiry—about our students. Who are they?

What are they experiencing in our schools? What are we doing that is working and what needs troubleshooting? Engaging with these questions requires the conditions that support brave, honest, equity-centered conversations. How else can we confront the challenges we experience in real time and the impact we are having on our most marginalized students?

We are so grateful to have supported over 600 educators this past year to engage in these conversations, deeply investigating the learning of the 430,000+ students they serve. As one participant put it, “My collaborative inquiry experiences this year have been invaluable for fostering shared learning, innovative thinking, and a strong sense of teamwork and camaraderie among colleagues, ultimately leading to personal and professional growth.”

I hope all educators feel the power that resides within them and within their communities. As Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond reminds us, we are called to build an education force to “pose and solve problems” and “assume leadership for change within rather than looking upward or outward for leadership.” Lead by Learning is privileged to partner with schools, districts, and nonprofits that are unleashing their power to positively impact students.

**Jennifer Ahn**  
Executive Director



# MISSION, VISION, AND VALUES

The quality of adult learning is critical to a system's ability to improve. Lead by Learning's updated mission, vision, and values reflect our renewed commitment to changing the way educators learn together so that individuals and systems are better equipped to make lasting, substantive improvements for students and the educators who serve and support them.

## VISION

Lead by Learning envisions a future where the transformative power of learning reshapes education systems and empowers students and educators to be agents of change in their lives and communities.

## MISSION

Our mission is to cultivate communities of adult learners who work toward educational equity through collaborative inquiry, collective efficacy, and shared action.

## OUR CORE VALUES



**PLACE STUDENTS AT THE CENTER:** We believe that effective collaboration centers student learning through the use of meaningful data.



**ENGAGE CURIOSITY:** We support our partner educators to build their inquiry stance, allowing questions and curiosity to drive instructional improvement.



**LEARN COLLABORATIVELY:** We engage educators at all levels of the system in building professional learning partnerships that fuel innovative instruction.



**QUESTION ASSUMPTIONS:** We believe inquiry is an equity strategy that helps educators understand learners' assets and build supportive awareness of implicit biases.



**HONOR LEARNER AGENCY:** We believe educators and students must be drivers of their own learning.



**RAISE TEACHER VOICES:** We strive to leverage educators' professional expertise and include their voices in the dialogue about education and equity.



**COMMIT TO ANTI-RACISM:** We deepen awareness of racial harm to engage in anti-racist action.

# IMPROVED STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH ADULT LEARNING

Empowering those who work closest to students to drive continuous improvement

Lead by Learning has long known that the quality of students' learning experiences is directly related to the quality of the professional learning experiences provided to the adults who work with them. When educators are given space to collaborate, unpack what is happening for their learners, vulnerably share problems of practice, and adapt, not only do they become important changemakers in their communities, but they feel nourished, experience belonging, and are more likely to stay in the field. Over this past year, Lead by Learning was recognized as a thought leader in the field of adult learning, spreading foundational practices and mindsets that nurture conditions for learning and growth in service of student outcomes.

## 2023-24 HIGHLIGHTS:

### Connected adult learning to student learning

**outcomes:** Lead by Learning worked with educator partners to understand how long-term investment in adult learning influences student outcomes.

- **El Cerrito High School's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT)** developed teacher leaders' capacity to facilitate classroom-based inquiry in department meetings. As a result, student achievement increased in English Language Arts and math for all demographic groups.
- **A middle school reading specialist's multi-year inquiry project** focused on students with limited phonemic awareness. By deepening her own learning, this educator supported her students to reach grade level proficiency by 10th grade.

### Recognized as a thought leader in the field of

**adult learning:** Lead by Learning's signature practices and mindsets were recognized in various

publications and podcasts as impactful methods that support adult learning in education systems.

- **Feature 7: Well-Prepared and Well-Supported Teachers of "Redesigning High Schools: 10 Features for Success"** by Learning Policy Institute (LPI) (2024)
- **Guide to Schoolwide SEL, Focus Area 2: Professional Learning about SEL** by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) (2024)
- **Small Shifts: Cultivating a Practice of Student-Centered Thinking** by Kim Austin (2023)
- **Street Data Pod, Episode 16: "Public Learning as a Way of Being"**: A conversation on Chapter 7 with Carrie Wilson and Jennifer Ahn (Aug 2023)
- **Fireside Chat: Policy Updates and Conversation with Vallejo Expanded Learning and Lead by Learning** by California Afterschool Network (CAN) (May 2024)

“Letting the data lead us into new places has become our reading program’s refrain as we continually work to improve offerings for our students.”

—Reading Specialist

**Broadened access to tools and resources that support meaningful adult learning:**

Lead by Learning developed a library of open-source resources to introduce educators to structures and practices that support collaborative adult learning steeped in curiosity, equity, and care for community.

9  
TOOLS

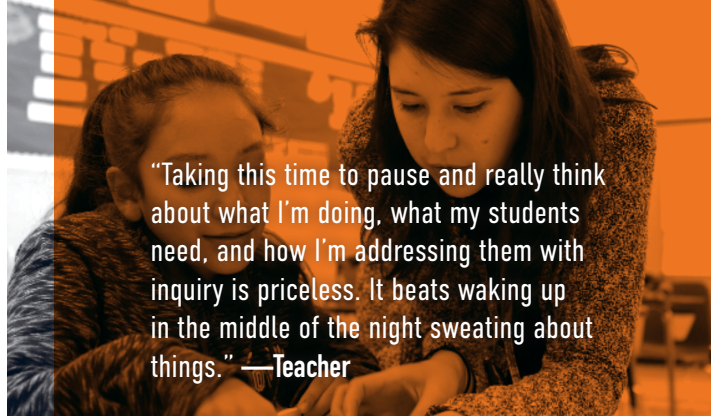
9 “**Step into Practice**” tools are now available on Lead by Learning’s website, each including a concrete tool, a facilitation guide, and an invitation to customize the tool to better suit one’s context.

27  
STATES

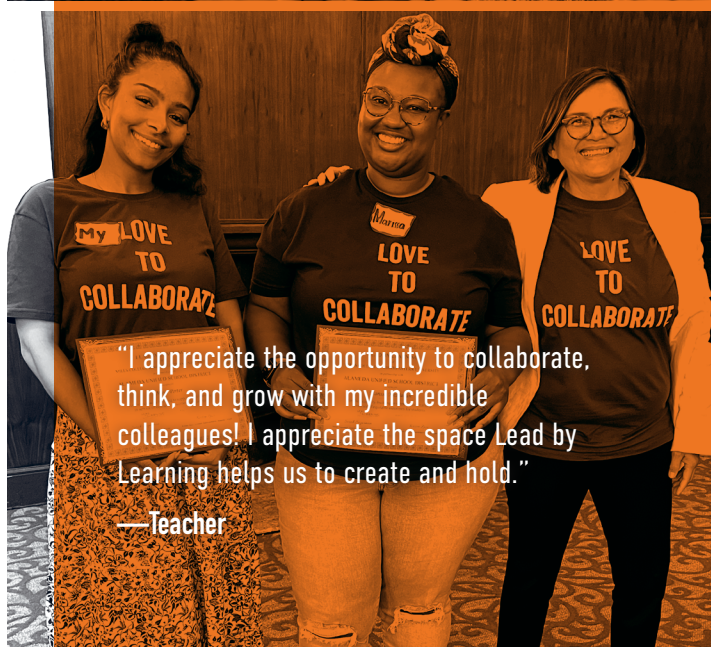
Lead by Learning’s open-source tools, on-demand learning, and updated **playbook** have been accessed in 27 states and by over 35 Schools of Education in the United States and overseas.



Lead by Learning staff published articles highlighting key practices in the **Aurora Institute** and in **EdWeek**.



“Taking this time to pause and really think about what I’m doing, what my students need, and how I’m addressing them with inquiry is priceless. It beats waking up in the middle of the night sweating about things.” —Teacher



“I appreciate the opportunity to collaborate, think, and grow with my incredible colleagues! I appreciate the space Lead by Learning helps us to create and hold.”

—Teacher



“Thank you all so much for such an informative discussion. You’re all very powerful leaders and shared extremely powerful information, wisdom, and encouragement.” —Teacher

# A WHOLE-CHILD APPROACH TO EDUCATION

Cultivating differentiated support and services to meet every child's needs

Lead by Learning is expanding its reach to include educators who serve students beyond the traditional classroom. Differentiated instruction is a critical driver of equity in education, and students benefit when they receive support and services that nurture belonging, thriving, and academic growth. By providing high-quality, role-relevant professional learning to Expanded Learning leaders and site coordinators, arts educators, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) leaders, school librarians, behavioral therapists, and school psychologists, Lead by Learning addresses an important need in education: the development of effective, student-centered educators who find innovative ways to support students beyond the traditional classroom.

"The student has learned how to self regulate and participate in the class at a normal level. He is autistic and fully integrated. He has learned about his own sensitivities and learned how to use the classroom so that he can stay engaged, including taking breaks in a resting corner with finger manipulatives and a chair that allows him to shift his energy. In today's class, he was able to calm his body and participate with all of the other students and enjoyed the class."

—SEL Lead Learner



## 2023-24 HIGHLIGHTS:

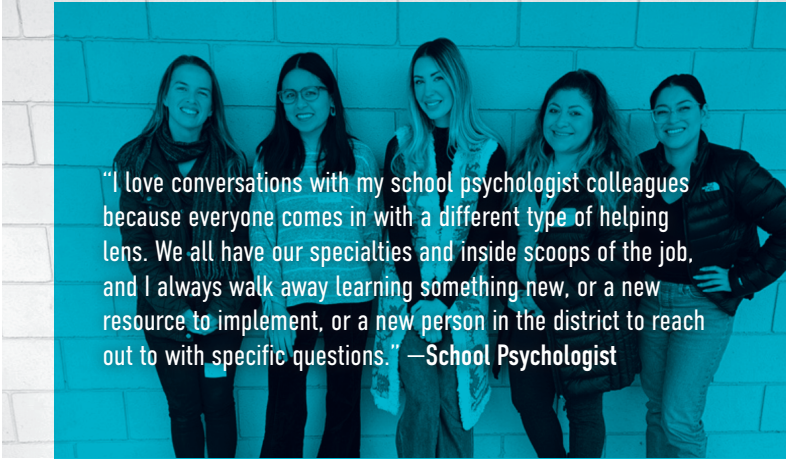
**Increased student learning while nurturing student thriving:** In Lead by Learning's 2023-24 Spring Survey, 97% of teachers reported focal student growth as a result of their collaborative learning. The top three areas of growth were:

**97%**  
REPORTED  
GROWTH

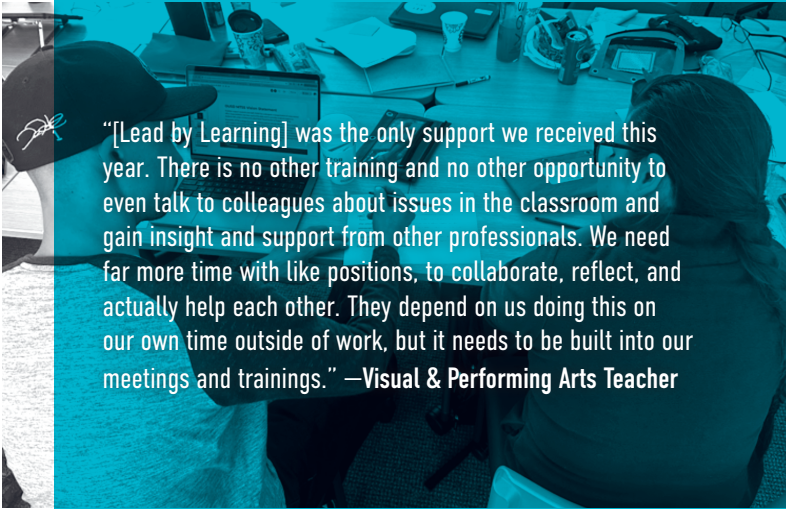
- Increased connection and belonging
- Increased engagement in learning
- Increased academic growth

**Provided role-specific professional learning to educators:** Lead by Learning facilitated meaningful, relevant professional learning that honors the professionalism and growth of over 400 certificated and classified educators, all of whom attend to students' needs beyond traditional classroom instruction. These educators' professional development is often overlooked, yet they play an important role in differentiating instruction for students who need it the most.

**Differentiated practices to meet students' needs:** Rather than asking students to conform to traditional school structures, Lead by Learning supported educators to learn about their students' needs and adapt practices in responsive, nurturing ways that build on each student's strengths.



"I love conversations with my school psychologist colleagues because everyone comes in with a different type of helping lens. We all have our specialties and inside scoops of the job, and I always walk away learning something new, or a new resource to implement, or a new person in the district to reach out to with specific questions." —School Psychologist



"[Lead by Learning] was the only support we received this year. There is no other training and no other opportunity to even talk to colleagues about issues in the classroom and gain insight and support from other professionals. We need far more time with like positions, to collaborate, reflect, and actually help each other. They depend on us doing this on our own time outside of work, but it needs to be built into our meetings and trainings." —Visual & Performing Arts Teacher

# EQUITY GROUNDED IN ANTI-RACISM

## Centering equity efforts on building anti-racism in schools

To further equity, Lead by Learning grounded initiatives on building an anti-racist stance in educators and schools. Across efforts, Lead by Learning amplified Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) experiences, enabling all educators to move beyond assumptions and into meaningful partnerships that not only restore trust, but deepen capacity to support those who have been historically marginalized in schools. As a result, educators engaged in important conversations about race, adapted instruction, and in the process, developed their collective efficacy by interrupting harmful dominant narratives about BIPOC students and colleagues.

### 2023-24 HIGHLIGHTS:

**Facilitated 2 professional affinity groups that call for racial justice and BIPOC thriving:** Lead by Learning designed and facilitated two anti-racist, professional affinity networks where educators delved into their lived experiences and explored how racism influences their day-to-day interactions with colleagues, students, and families. As a result, educators became better equipped to interrupt racial harm and support BIPOC educators and students to thrive in schools.



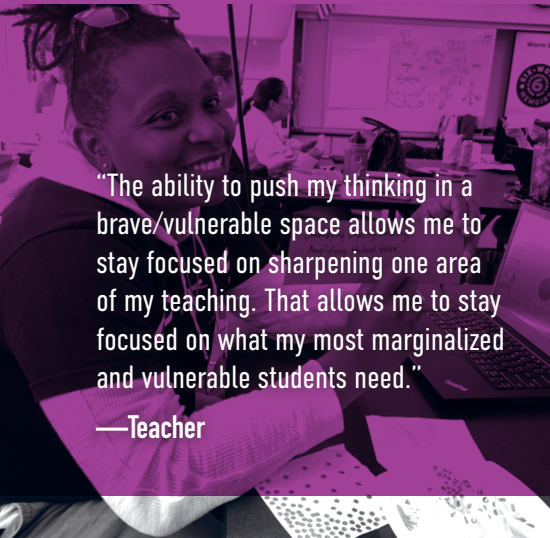
#### The BIPOC Leaders Network:

“This is one of the few places where I feel affirmed for who I am. No unspoken judgments. I can speak freely. Being among BIPOC folks, there is an invisible connection and understanding.”

— BIPOC Leaders Network participant

#### The White Educators Anti-racist Inquiry Network (WEAIN):

“I was fully supported in this environment and felt completely safe to learn and inquire and share. Honestly, I was nervous to attend and did the reading ahead of time just to emotionally prepare for what I thought I was going to hear today about ‘being a bad white person.’ This session was very valuable.” — WEAIN participant



“The ability to push my thinking in a brave/vulnerable space allows me to stay focused on sharpening one area of my teaching. That allows me to stay focused on what my most marginalized and vulnerable students need.”

—Teacher



“Before blaming the child, really think about what you are saying and how the environment is supporting or not supporting the child. Really it should be the school adapting to the child.”

—Multilingual Specialist

**Provided concrete strategies to further equity through anti-racism:** To build educators’ ability to address equity challenges in their work, Lead by Learning refined program features and tools and published educator blogs that highlight what it looks like to support **honest conversations** about equity that **improve outcomes** for historically marginalized students.

**530+**  
EDUCATORS

530+ educators registered for this year’s three-part webinar series, “**Building on Our Strengths**,” which spotlighted how educators can build shared vision, collaboration, and distributive leadership to increase equity and anti-racism in schools.

**96%**  
BUILT  
RELATIONSHIPS

96% of educator partners engaged in **Focal Student Learning Partnership Conversations**, a key feature in Lead by Learning’s work, with focal students who identified as part of a historically marginalized group.

**Examined how to create spaces that connect anti-racism with collective efficacy:** While collective efficacy is one of the most important factors to improve student outcomes, Lead by Learning noticed educators often fall into equity traps when examining their efficacy at supporting historically marginalized students. As a result, Lead by Learning launched research to understand how to create spaces where educators build their collective efficacy when applied specifically to historically marginalized students. Early inspiration for this work was published in Jennifer Ahn’s article, “**Equity-Centered Evaluation Brings Up Emotions. That’s OK**,” in the February 2024 edition of the Learning Professional.

**95%**  
REPORTED  
MAKING A  
DIFFERENCE

95% of educators reported that they believe they and their colleagues can make a difference for their historically marginalized students after engaging in year-long partnerships with Lead by Learning.



# SYSTEMS CHANGE THROUGH DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP

Developing leaders who operationalize a shared vision through collaboration and trust

To address complex problems, education systems are turning to distributive leadership to create coherence and sustain improvement. Lead by Learning believes teacher leaders are an important lever in this work. Their on-the-ground perspectives are essential to unify and operationalize site and district goals. This year, Lead by Learning deepened teacher leadership by increasing partnerships with Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs), building teacher leaders' capacity to facilitate adult learning for their peers, and ensuring teacher leaders are working alongside site and district leaders to identify goals and monitor progress. Not only has this supported more coherence and buy-in across education systems, but also deepened collaboration and trust, increasing educator retention and satisfaction.

## 2023-24 HIGHLIGHTS:

**Invested in teacher leadership to enhance collaboration and coherence in schools and education systems:** Lead by Learning created multiple pathways for partners to deepen and leverage teacher leadership in their systems. This was accomplished using an integrated, experiential approach, where teacher leaders were invited to collaborate routinely with site and district leaders to develop shared understanding of purpose and progress.

**12**  
LEADERSHIP-TEAM  
PARTNERSHIPS

Lead by Learning engaged in 12 intensive partnerships with Instructional Leadership Teams.

**181**  
DESIGN TEAM  
MEETINGS

Lead by Learning facilitated 181 Design Team meetings, in which educators from multiple roles return to vision, understand current reality, and identify next steps together.

**22**  
VISIONING  
SESSIONS

Lead by Learning facilitated 22 visioning sessions, in which voices across roles and responsibilities came together to set purpose and goals for adult learning in their systems.

**2K**  
EDUCATORS  
IMPACTED

Working in partnership with teacher leaders, Lead by Learning influenced the learning of over 2,000 educators across 12 districts.



**Developed whole-systems approaches to adult learning involving multiple levels and sites:** Lead by Learning supported alignment and coherence across education systems, breaking traditional silos between sites and educators from one another. These partnerships opened communication and collaboration, leveraging local expertise system-wide to make progress.

**6**  
WHOLE-SYSTEM  
PARTNERSHIPS

6 whole-system partnerships in which Lead by Learning facilitated collaboration across multiple levels of the system.

**10**  
CROSS-NETWORK  
PARTNERSHIPS

10 cross-network partnerships in which Lead by Learning facilitated collaboration for role-alike educators across multiple school sites.

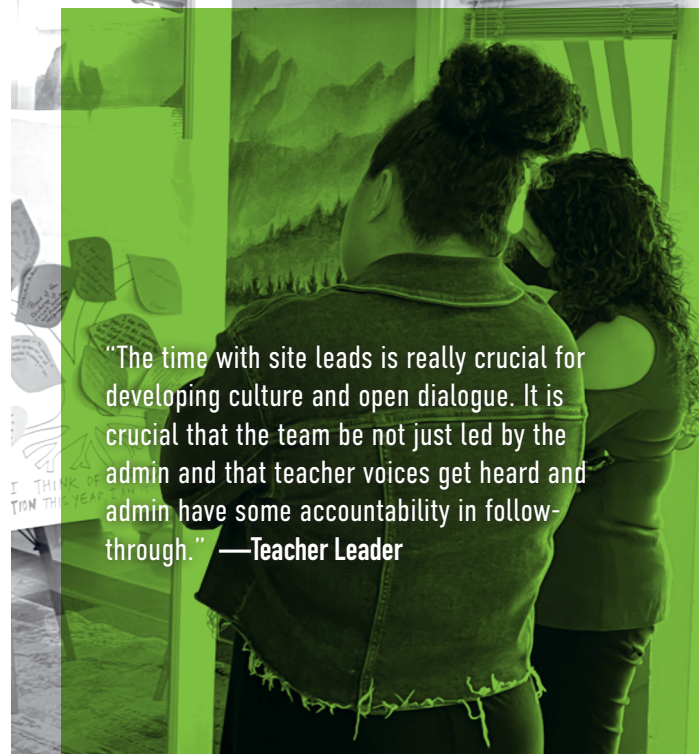
**Increased educator retention and satisfaction during a state-wide teacher shortage:** In the midst of a California-wide teacher shortage, Lead by Learning's focus on adult learning and distributive leadership has increased both educator satisfaction and retention, creating stability for systems and their communities.

**89%**  
REPORTED  
SATISFACTION

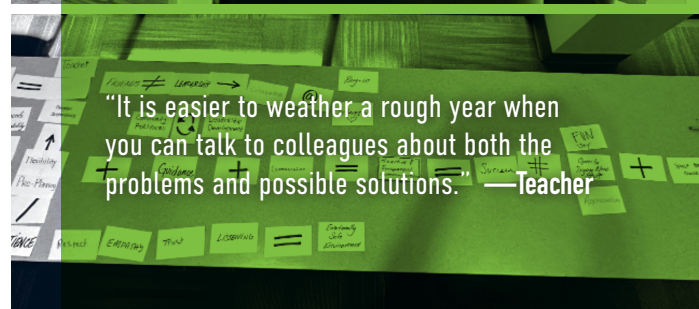
89% of participants reported increased professional satisfaction as a result of their work with Lead by Learning.

**94%**  
EDUCATOR  
RETENTION

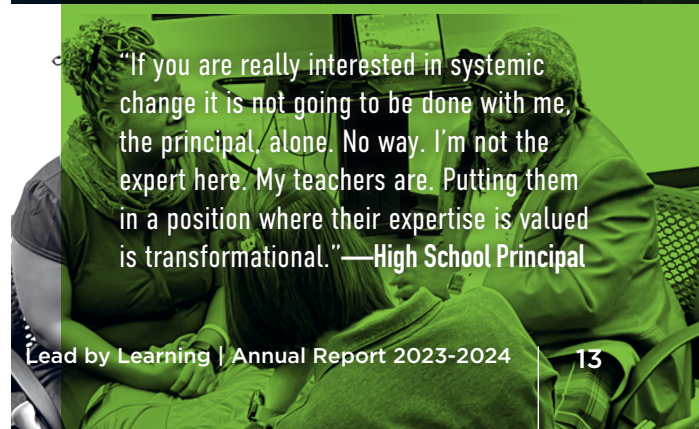
94% of educator partners reported they plan to stay in the field of education.



"The time with site leads is really crucial for developing culture and open dialogue. It is crucial that the team be not just led by the admin and that teacher voices get heard and admin have some accountability in follow-through." —Teacher Leader

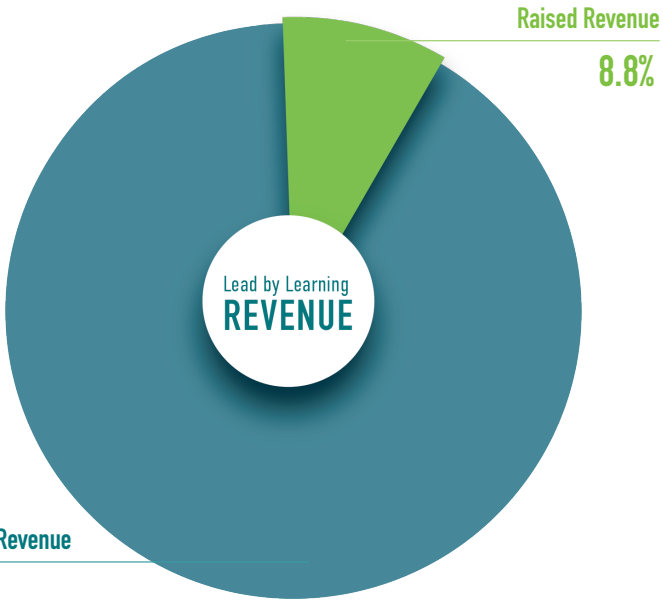


"It is easier to weather a rough year when you can talk to colleagues about both the problems and possible solutions." —Teacher



"If you are really interested in systemic change it is not going to be done with me, the principal, alone. No way. I'm not the expert here. My teachers are. Putting them in a position where their expertise is valued is transformational." —High School Principal

# 2023-24 FINANCES



Earned Revenue

91.2%

## 2023-24 Revenue

- \$105,870.00 Raised Revenue
- \$1,095,896.00 Earned Revenue
- 93.5% of our expenses go toward personnel

## Donor Recognition



# HONORING THE PAST WHILE PAVING THE WAY FOR THE FUTURE

## The Anna Richert Legacy Award in Education Leadership

Lead by Learning proudly launched the Anna Richert Legacy Award in Education Leadership at the Inquiry in Action Forum in May 2024. This award recognizes champions of adult learning who support educators to continuously analyze impact to adapt instruction to better meet students' real-time needs. The first recipients were Carrie Wilson and Claire Bove, who co-founded Mills Teachers Scholars (now Lead by Learning) with Anna Richert and then led the organization for over a decade, significantly influencing the practices of countless teachers and leaders.

## Lead by Learning, a Center of Mills College at Northeastern University

As the newest Center of Mills College at Northeastern University, Lead by Learning continues to be grounded in collaborative inquiry to build the capacity of educators and leaders to enhance student learning experiences. Proudly continuing Mills College's legacy of social justice in the community, Lead by Learning now sits at the intersection between practitioner learning and the academy, positioning educators as important contributors to the field, bridging research with real-life application.



# WHAT WE DO

## Roots to Shoots

Educators and their professional environment are the root system of school communities and classrooms. When root systems are healthy, educators sustain thriving school communities by scanning the wellbeing of their students and their school, creatively utilizing resources, and working together to problem solve. When root systems experience instability, educators burn out, instruction suffers, and schools struggle to prioritize or adapt, ultimately restricting students' opportunities to grow.

### We vigilantly attend to schools' root systems.

We create the conditions that deepen the mindsets and practices that enable educators to collaboratively attend to students and families, especially those furthest from opportunity. We develop root systems that unearth problems of practice, build collective efficacy, distribute instructional leadership, and adapt instruction to support student growth.

All students deserve an education that leads to agency, opportunity, and choice, but not all students have access to this. Root systems of adult learning are critical to improve instruction and disrupt predictive outcomes.

## SHOOT SYSTEM

student learning  
experiences and  
outcomes



## ROOT SYSTEM

the collective and  
collaborative energy it takes to  
support the shoot system



# SHOOT SYSTEM OUTCOMES

## Shared Vision For Learning

Educators and students develop shared understanding of goals and purpose for learning.

## Improved Instructional Practice

Educators continuously adapt instruction and change their practice in response to student learning data.

## Equitable Learning Outcomes

All students experience accelerated progress, with an emphasis on disrupting predictive outcomes for historically marginalized focal groups.

## Social-Emotional & Academic Integration

Students develop their learning identities and a sense of belonging as members of vibrant, culturally responsive learning communities.

# ROOT SYSTEM OUTCOMES

## Shared Vision For Learning

Student and adult learning goals are grounded in a shared instructional vision and drive instructional change.

## Use of Data to Drive Equitable Change

Adults collect and analyze data that uncovers learners' daily experiences to drive instructional and cultural change.

## Culture of Public Learning and Supportive Challenge

Collaborative spaces promote honest thinking, shared responsibility, and self-awareness to drive improvement.

## Distributed Leadership of Professional Learning

District, site, and/or teacher leader teams work in partnership to vision for, design, and lead learning for adults.

# STRATEGIC PLAN: OUR FUTURE

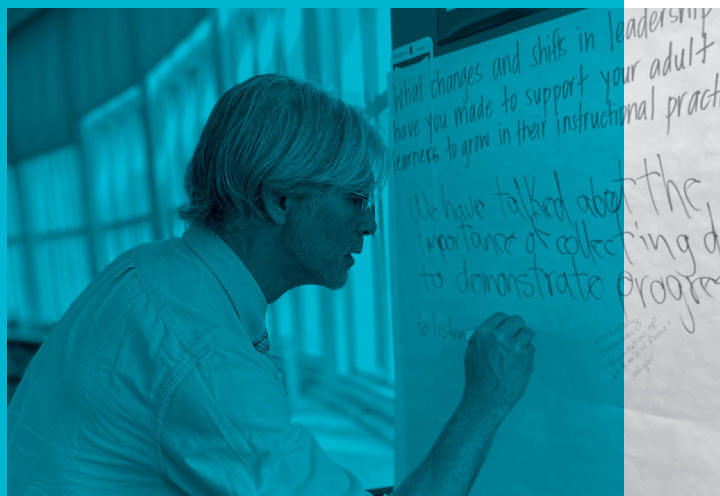
## RISE: A Focus on Systems Change Grounded in Equity and Anti-Racism

To disrupt historic injustice, education systems must intentionally prioritize anti-racism and equity-seeking action. Over the next three years, Lead by Learning will pursue this aim not only with partners across our greater network, but also internally as an organization. By cultivating inwardly an unwavering commitment to anti-racist exploration, inquiry, and action, Lead by Learning will develop and deepen structures of collaborative adult learning. These frameworks enable educators and educational systems to identify equity challenges, discuss them openly, and build individual and systemic capacity to interrupt racism by adapting instruction in ways that center historically marginalized students, families, and colleagues.



Ultimately, transformative adult learning involves shifting mental models and moving beyond default practices that produce predictive, disproportionate outcomes. This work cannot happen unless we cultivate partnerships and thoughtfully collaborate with those on the ground. It requires all—individuals and systems—to notice, collaborate, question, challenge, and commit to racial justice.





## CONNECT WITH US

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