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| Influence 100  Cohort 5, Year 1 Report |
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| **June 28, 2024** |

Influence 100: Cohort 5, Year 1 Report

Prepared by the UMass Donahue Institute

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# Executive Summary

This evaluation report reflects on Cohort 5 fellows’ first year of participation in the two-year Influence 100 fellowship program. The UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) was contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to conduct this evaluation. In FY24, the evaluation included session observations, interviews and focus groups with fellows, and monthly reflection meetings with the DESE program team. This is the final report of the FY24 evaluation year.

## Key Findings

1. **Fellows indicated overall satisfaction with their Influence 100 experiences.**

Some fellows indicated that simply being part of the Influence 100 program was empowering. Many appreciated sharing time and space with BIPOC educational leaders and facilitators. Fellows cited opportunities to reflect, to feel a sense of belonging, and to build relationships with likeminded colleagues. Site visits were viewed as valuable opportunities to observe how other districts work and to interact with superintendents and leaders in parallel and different roles.

1. **Fellows described a range of learning and growth during their first year in the program.**

Some fellows clearly identified skills they gained during their first year; some others did not attribute any new skills to Influence 100 but reported shifts in their perspective, understanding, motivation, or approach. The growth that fellows described related to the three skills identified by program facilitators as the focus for Cohort 5, but fellows generally did not link their growth directly to those skills.

1. **Despite their overall satisfaction, many fellows were disappointed in what they had hoped they would learn and practice but didn’t—especially in terms of practical preparation for a superintendent position.**

This disappointment appeared to stem from misalignment between fellows’ priorities and expectations and the program team’s goals and strategies. Fellows had big expectations rooted in the hope and promise inspired by the existence of such an initiative. They came to the program with diverse experiences and priorities, not all of which aligned with Influence 100’s curriculum and structure. The program’s focus on cultural competence felt dissonant to fellows who regarded this as an existing area of strength linked to their identities.

## Recommendations and Insights

1. **Share information early to maximize opportunities for fellows to understand intended program outcomes and program structure while allowing for programmatic flexibility and adaptation.**

Given the varied skills, backgrounds, and goals of the fellows, it is important for Influence 100 leadership to set and clearly communicate expectations early on. Program leaders and participants should have a shared understanding of what will be prioritized, how those priorities will be approached, and the process for making necessary adjustments.

1. **Clarify and routinely revisit the program’s learning goals with fellows, especially in relation to their existing cultural competence.**

Fellows’ feedback suggested they did not interpret the focus skills as facilitators intended. Influence 100 leadership should work to establish a shared understanding with fellows about curriculum, learning goals, and focus skills, including the connections between the focus skills and the needs and existing competencies of aspiring BIPOC superintendents. Such an understanding could be revisited through a collaborative reflection process.

1. **Revisit the initiative’s relative prioritization of cultural competence and responsiveness versus superintendent preparation and/or consider differentiating program content for fellows with different identities.**

Some fellows expressed confusion about whether the initiative’s priority was training fellows to be culturally responsive leaders or training culturally responsive leaders to be superintendents. They questioned the emphasis on cultural competence during the first year, given their identities and experiences. Many fellows expressed a preference for learning practical tools and strategies that would prepare them for superintendency in the context of anticipated additional scrutiny of BIPOC leaders.

1. **Continue to strive for programmatic messaging that is hopeful yet realistic—that balances encouragement to embrace possible future gains with acknowledgement of current and future challenges.**

The initiative is navigating a tension between encouraging leaders of color to pursue ambitious positions and acknowledging the extent of the challenges they are likely to face. As fellows learn more about the superintendency, some are discouraged by new or confirming information about the inherent challenges, particularly for equity-focused and BIPOC leaders. They could benefit from opportunities for collective processing with Influence 100 facilitators and other fellows.

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# Introduction

This evaluation report reflects on the first-year experiences of the fifth cohort of fellows to participate in the Influence 100 initiative. Influence 100 is a two-year fellowship program, launched by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) in 2019 “to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of superintendents in Massachusetts, create more culturally responsive districts and leaders across the Commonwealth, and promote better outcomes for students.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Since summer 2020, the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) has been contracted by DESE to conduct an evaluation of the Influence 100 initiative.[[2]](#footnote-3) In FY24, the evaluation focused on the first-year experiences of Cohort 5 fellows. The FY24 evaluation included session observations, interviews and focus groups with fellows, and monthly reflection and update meetings with the DESE program team.

In this report, we aim to capture key elements of fellows’ first-year experiences in Influence 100 with the goal of providing relevant feedback that DESE may use to inform future program implementation.

### About Cohort 5

Cohort 5 consists of 20 fellows from 14 districts. Fellows’ roles included principal, district-level director or specialist, and assistant superintendent. The first year of programming for this group included an online orientation session; an in-person kick-off day; monthly day-long sessions (three in-person site visits and three online sessions); quarterly online meetings involving fellows, superintendents and school committee members; and an end-of-year Partners in Equity Leadership Conference with participants from across the Commonwealth. Cohort 5 sessions were planned and facilitated by Ms. Darcy Fernandes, Senior Associate Commissioner at DESE and Dr. Michele Shannon, National Designer and Facilitator at The Leadership Academy (TLA). A more detailed summary of Cohort 5 FY24 programming can be found in Appendix A.

Program facilitators identified three specific skill areas as focus points for Cohort 5 in FY24:

1. Acts with cultural competence and responsiveness in interactions, decision-making, and practice
2. Purposefully builds the capacity of others to identify and disrupt inequities in the school
3. Confronts and alters institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with minoritized populations

These skills were regular reference points during cohort sessions and were a key focus of the evaluation.

### Organization of this report

The following section describes the **methods** for the evaluation and is followed by our **findings**, which are organized around a set of key themes derived from our analysis. The section reflecting on the three focus skills begins on page 9. We close the report with **recommendations and insights** that we developed throughout the year, reflecting on data, observations, and conversations with the program team.

***Note:*** Please see preliminary pages i–ii for a summary of key findings and recommendations and insights.

# Methods

This report draws primarily on data gathered from spring 2024 interviews and focus groups with Cohort 5 fellows. Analyses were informed by session observations conducted throughout the program year, reflective conversations with DESE, and by findings from fall 2023 fellow interviews.[[3]](#footnote-4)

## Interviews and Focus Groups

### Protocols

The UMDI team developed interview and focus group protocols in January 2024 and revised them based on feedback from DESE. The protocols were finalized in February. The majority of questions in both protocols focused on fellows’ growth and learning in three specific skill areas identified as focal points for Cohort 5 by program facilitators.

The protocols also asked how well the program met fellows’ expectations and sought fellows’ suggestions for program improvement. There were slight variations between the interview and focus group protocols to accommodate the different data collection methods. The Spring 2024 Interview Protocol can be found in Appendix C and the Focus Group Protocol in Appendix D.

During the focus groups, facilitators asked all the questions, but prioritized following the lead of fellows in terms of subject matter, rather than insisting on strict adherence to the questions.

### Recruitment

**Focus Groups -** In January, we emailed a scheduling poll to 12 of the 14 fellows who had not been included in the fall interviews to determine their availability between the March 1 in-person site visit session and the April 12 online session.[[4]](#footnote-5) We chose two focus group dates to accommodate as many fellows as possible. Ultimately, 11 out of the 12 invited fellows participated in these focus groups — seven in the first group and four in the second. Both sessions were conducted and recorded via Zoom and lasted approximately one hour each.

**Interviews -** At the end of January, we emailed the six fellows who had participated in the fall interviews to schedule a second interview after the April 12 Cohort 5 online session.[[5]](#footnote-6) All six interviews were conducted via Zoom between April 16 and May 6, 2024. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded via Zoom.

### Analysis

Analysis of interview and focus group data included both inductive and deductive coding of transcripts generated by Zoom and verified by the evaluation team. We used the interview protocol structure as a guide for coding and we also identified emergent themes. At DESE’s request, a focus of the analysis was fellows’ growth and learning—by which we mean shifts in knowledge, attitudes, or skills. All quotes were verified by the evaluation team and have been lightly edited for clarity (e.g., removal of filler words and false starts) and to remove identifying information.

## Session Observations

Session observations provided additional insight into fellows’ engagement with program elements and any observable shifts in thinking. A member of the UMDI evaluation team attended all virtual and in-person Cohort 5 meetings, including one online orientation session, one in-person kickoff session, three site visits, three online fellows’ sessions, three online Quarterly District Meeting sessions, and the Partners in Equity Leadership Conference. Reflections and insights from these observations were subsequently shared at UMDI/DESE monthly evaluation meetings, varying in focus based on requests and feedback from the DESE program team. While these observations were not part of the formal data collection, they contributed to the findings presented in this report.

## Evaluation Team Positionality

This work was conducted by a three-person evaluation team consisting of a white cisgender man, a white cisgender woman, and a mixed-race cisgender woman—all middle-aged, all possessing advanced degrees, and all native English speakers born in the U.S. Two team members have extensive experience in both working within and researching public K-12 education.

As a team, we approached this evaluation with a commitment to the values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. We believe that systemic racism has resulted in harm—knowable and unknowable—to Black and brown people and their communities. The resulting enduring and compounding advantages and disadvantages do harm to all communities and implicate us regardless of our intentions. Furthermore, we believe that society has a responsibility to promote social justice, to create opportunities for marginalized or excluded groups, and to critically examine and better understand our own contributions to injustice.

## Limitations

A primary limitation of this year’s evaluation is that data collected on growth and learning relied on self-reported responses, which were influenced by fellows’ perceptions, expectations, background experiences, and positionality. These factors were further influenced by events that unfolded over the course of the year (e.g., difficult site visits, news about challenges faced by current superintendents) and heightened fellows’ attention to particular aspects of the program. For example, one focus group took place a week after a challenging site visit. Attendance at the focus group was higher than anticipated and conversation during the group was dominated by fellows’ reflections on that visit.

As a team, our racial and ethnic identities differ from the majority of Influence 100 fellows, potentially impacting our data collection and analysis in ways that are impossible to know. At minimum, we recognize that we do not share a crucial aspect of experiential background that many fellows have in common and would define as foundational to their approaches to leadership and equity. During one focus group, one fellow directly addressed this limitation, noting near the end of the session that the two facilitators “don’t look like me,” and continued with,

“What I want to say, I don't feel comfortable saying to y'all, because I feel like it's not for your ears, really. […] If there were people on your team that looked like us, I'd be more comfortable because the natural processing that needs to happen with that information— like your brain […]. It's wired differently. Cause the experience isn't there for me to speak to. Like I'm telling you like my traumas, but they'll never be your traumas.”

# Findings

The following findings were generated through analysis of data from the spring focus groups and interviews, and informed by findings from the fall interviews, session observations, and reflective conversations with DESE. The organizing themes reflect a mix of subjects targeted by protocol questions and topics that emerged as meaningful to fellows during our analysis. These themes are: satisfied expectations; what fellows liked; what fellows missed; fellows’ growth (including reflections on focus skills); disconnect in expectations; what needs to be clarified; and fellow’s suggestions.

## Satisfied Expectations

In focus groups and interviews, fellows were asked to rate (on a scale from 1–10) the extent to which the program had met their expectations in the first year. Ratings ranged from 4–10, with a mean score of 7, suggesting a generally positive response. Fellows’ comments regarding how the program did and did not meet their expectations are integrated throughout the findings.

### Appreciation for the Influence 100 program

Some fellows expressed appreciation for the existence of the Influence 100 program, recognizing DESE’s commitment to its goals and efforts to support BIPOC leaders in becoming superintendents. As one fellow said,

“The fact that Massachusetts has recognized […] that there's not enough representation of people of color, at least in superintendent roles, and actually created a program that is attempting to address that. […] And the fact that we're having this conversation and trying to figure out how to make it better for the next cohort. […] But the fact that they're acknowledging that we need to do this. Whatever criticism that anyone has, that to me is overshadowed in a way by the fact that at least there's effort. There are some areas, I'm sure, across our nation where they're not prioritizing changing the demographic of superintendents in their states. And so, I'm privileged to be a part of this program, and whether I become a superintendent or not, the fact that somebody's looking to really open up doors and opportunities for people like me. I can't say enough positivity about that.”

Some noted that just being part of such a program is empowering. Many fellows appreciated the shared time and space with other fellows and with facilitators. They cited opportunities to reflect, to be exposed to different settings, to be on a journey together, to feel a sense of belonging, to feel heard by those in power, and to build relationships with likeminded colleagues. Consistently, fellows expressed feeling inspired by having a leader like Ms. Fernandes.

## What Fellows Liked

When reflecting on the aspects of the Influence 100 program that met their expectations and what they liked, many fellows mentioned the **facilitators and their cohort-mates**.

* Many appreciated opportunities to reflect and relate with other BIPOC leaders about their experiences. One fellow explained, “What I love as a format is really just having that space for BIPOC leaders like me, because it's important for people like me to belong. […] Being in a room full of BIPOC leaders, it really gave me hope, and it really gave me that sense of belonging, and also the feeling that I'm not alone.”
* Fellows also appreciated the discussions about equity within the cohort. One fellow referenced the value of having talk about disrupting inequities “baked in” to the program. Another fellow noted, “I appreciate the opportunity to just grapple with difficult topics.”
* One fellow referenced the network that Influence 100 is building across the state as a valuable resource for equity leaders.
* Fellows appreciated the in-person sessions that brought them together, including time spent sharing meals.
* Fellows consistently mentioned the value of **hearing directly from Ms. Fernandes as a person of color and former superintendent**. One fellow remarked, “It's always great to bounce your ideas off of your cohort-mates, but also Darcy—I just think she has so much wisdom and is able to think so clearly about all of these things based on her experiences.”

Overall, fellows were **positive about the site visit opportunities**.

* As one fellow said, “I'm a person who learns best by doing and seeing. So I really love those trips.”
* Many fellows expressed appreciation for the site visits as **opportunities to see how other districts work**, and to hear from district leaders.
* One fellow said, “I appreciated our district visits, even though all of the district visits were not positive or did not land positively with me. I did still appreciate the experience.”
* Another fellow commented, “Being able to interact with other leaders and learn from their experiences and even network with people. I found that extremely helpful.”
* At least one fellow specifically referenced the value of tying districts’ visions and strategic plans into the walk-throughs through pre-work and the structure of the visits.

Several fellows noted their appreciation for **various aspects of session structure and content**.

* In regard to virtual sessions, one fellow noted that having **clear structure and expectations for breakout groups** ensured that they were a good use of time.
* Another fellow valued the **Quarterly District Meetings as an important opportunity** for district leadership to hear about the focus of the program and keep pace with what fellows are working on.
* Several fellows mentioned that they benefitted from the **assigned readings** (one fellow described them as “very, very rich”), though opinions differed regarding how much session time should have been dedicated to discussing the readings.

## What Fellows Missed

Fellows prioritized different content and learning opportunities depending on their experiences, positions, and professional goals. These priorities were reflected in the range of responses they provided regarding their satisfaction with the Influence 100 program in their first year. In this section, we summarize what fellows expressed was missing from the **program content**. Suggestions for changes to **program structure** are introduced in the Fellows’ Suggestions section and presented in detail in Appendix E.

Many fellows lamented the lack of **focus on the “technical, practical, and all the other aspects of leading an entire district”** in preparation for a superintendent position. Specifically, these fellows wanted to learn what the day-to-day of a superintendent looks like and how it is different from their current positions.

* A common theme in fellows’ comments was a desire for **more preparation for the superintendent hiring process**. Fellows would like explicit instruction related to applying for and obtaining a superintendent position.
* One fellow expressed regret over not receiving **coaching that was individualized** and customized to their specific path and position. They considered this crucial for the program to meet its goal of helping fellows advance toward a superintendent position.
* At the root of these priorities is fellows’ **awareness of the vulnerability of superintendents of color** and strong equity advocates to removal from their positions.
* One fellow offered this strategy for incorporating more practical and differentiated content:

“Survey us, based on the standards from the Department of Ed for being a superintendent. Which one of these do you want to know? Do you know how to budget? Do you know how to manage operations? Do you know how to lead people? And then from there maybe build the Influence 100, still with the equity focus, but incorporating all of these different standards to truly prepare us to become an effective superintendent and retain us as potential superintendents and assistant superintendents, and build our mental and emotional stamina to really confront what's really out there.”

Fellows expressed a desire for more **in-person discussions with the cohort and with Ms. Fernandes**, to take advantage of the different experiences, positions, and perspectives in the room, and to learn from each other.

* Several fellows expressed that they missed having more **in-person and structured opportunities for community building** **and relationship building** within Cohort 5. During fall interviews there was a recurring theme of anticipation of the cohort, and as the year was coming to a close, fellows wished they had gotten to know each other better. One fellow remarked they were not sure they even knew all the names of the Cohort 5 fellows.
* One fellow proposed using session time to engage in **case-specific problem-solving** and strategizing to address inequities and barriers to equity-focused leadership. Their suggestion involved drawing on Ms. Fernandes’ experience and expertise as well as input from fellows to come up with responses to real challenges fellows are facing.

Other fellows mentioned wanting **tools to be more effective in equity-focused efforts**; e.g., to be listened to more, and to have the legal and other references to support their claims. One fellow felt there was a gap in instruction and practice around **using and analyzing data**, including district self-assessment, to guide current equity work.

Fellows want regular opportunities to **work beside and** **learn from their district leaders**. There is a broad range in fellows’ experiences with the mentorship component of Influence 100, from regular contact with and support from their district superintendent to minimal contact and frustration at failed attempts to schedule meetings. The fellows who do have regular opportunities to work with their district leaders report benefiting from the experience. Fellows expressed that they would like more support from DESE around the mentorship they understood would be included in their Influence 100 experience.

* Experiences with mentorship related to fellows’ requests for more technical and practical content because **fellows regarded working closely with a superintendent as an opportunity to learn the practical content**. The level of contact a fellow had with their district superintendent affected how much of that practical content they received outside of the Influence 100 curriculum and therefore how many topics fellows relied on Influence 100 to cover.

While fellows appreciate the learning opportunities site visits offer, as discussed above, some fellows were **looking for something more, or something different, in the visits**.

* At least one fellow wanted to focus the visits on districts that could serve as exemplars or models of successful equity work and wanted **opportunities to observe best practices**.
* Another fellow wanted to use visit sessions to **engage in more discussion with current superintendents** about the position or role of a superintendent.
* Another fellow requested “being able to see how the superintendent transfers or translates what they see, what they experience in their buildings with their principals, with their teachers, and then translate that to change that deals with these inequities, this colorblindness and this deficit thinking. It's like **we got the ‘So what?’ but not the ‘Now what?’**”

Central to the discussion in one of the focus groups was the experience of a missed opportunity to provide feedback to a district where fellows identified blatant and troubling inequities during a site visit. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, there was a strong message that fellows would like Influence 100 to set them up to take advantage of **district visits as opportunities to give feedback and to practice confronting and altering inequities they observe**. Fellows viewed these visits as forums where district leaders could benefit from fellows’ experience and expertise, and they are eager to jump in and contribute to positive change.

## Fellows’ Growth

Fellows described a range of learning and growth during their first year in the program. Some identified skills they had gained, while others, including some who did not attribute any new skills to Influence 100, recognized that the program helped them to see things differently, motivated them to act on ideas they had been considering, or convinced them to seek positions with more authority to make change.

The two sections below capture, in turn, fellows’ reflections on their learning, growth, and gains overall, and on their growth in the focus skill areas. There is overlap but not direct alignment between these two sections and we reflect on this disconnect between fellows’ perceptions of their growth and the three focus skills in the Recommendations and Insights section.

### Learning, growth, and gains overall

The growth described below is closely related to the three focus skills, though only in some cases did fellows link the growth they experienced to an identified skill.

#### Communicating the message

Strategic communication skills were referenced by many fellows in the fall interviews as among the skills they wanted to develop for a range of situations. In spring focus groups and interviews, fellows shared related gains they felt they had made and attributed to Influence 100.

* One fellow expressed having developed a clearer understanding of the cultural competence and responsiveness that came “naturally” by virtue of being a person of color, and having gained **more effective language** to talk about it.
* Another fellow discussed having an **increased awareness** of the different ways to have difficult conversations, and the choices one makes about **the pace of change** (e.g., build and leverage relationships and go slowly, or demand what is already overdue). This fellow talked about focusing on the long term rather than the immediate, and “systemic impact versus individual impact.”
* Another fellow referenced **thinking more structurally and systematically** about what is contributing to conflicting perceptions of equity and conflicting priorities, and finding ways to make conflict feel less personal and to be less defensive.
* Some fellows talked about **recognizing varying perspectives** and trying to make space for others’ growth, and approaching others (colleagues, community members) from a stance of educating.
* One fellow described being able to **respond in a more reflective and intentional way** to their own district leadership.

#### Understanding the role

Fellows emphasized the importance of understanding the role of the superintendent, especially in relation to their current positions.

* Fellows reported **growth through visiting districts** and “seeing […] what to do and what not to do.”
* They also described **feeling empowered** through practice **interacting with district leaders**. As one fellow put it, “being in a position where I can reflect and talk with superintendents […] and they actually listen. It made me feel more empowered to have these conversations.”
* Fellows also indicated gaining a new or deeper **understanding of the political realities** and barriers for culturally competent and responsive leaders. Site visits and other program activities, they said, contributed to deeper understanding of the character demands and interpersonal skills required of the superintendent position.

#### Getting reinforcement

Participation in Influence 100 provided **reinforcement and validation** as well as **motivation and inspiration** to fellows to continue the equity efforts they are already involved in.

* “If I want to be a part of the change,” one said, “I need to get a seat at the table. And so now this **makes me even more determined**.”
* The discussions and activities also **solidified previously-understood concepts** for fellows and confirmed their approaches and priorities.
* One fellow recognized **increased confidence**, and another identified the **ability to be “unapologetic” about pointing out inequities and institutional bias**, thanks to Influence 100.
* Within existing equity work, one fellow described **moving from thinking to doing**, nudged by participation in the Influence 100 initiative.
* Fellows who have increased access to district leaders because of the mentoring component of Influence 100 had **new opportunities to practice culturally responsive leadership**. However, limited positional authority remains a barrier for some in these settings.

### Reflections on Focus Skills

Fellows rarely drew direct connections between their growth and learning in Influence 100 and the specific focus skill areas, despite our targeted questioning in focus groups and interviews. This section captures fellows’ growth that can be connected to the focus skills, as well as their thoughts and reflections about the skill areas themselves.

#### Acts with cultural competence and responsiveness in interactions, decision-making, and practice

As noted in the fall interview brief, many fellows entered the program feeling that they had a **firmly established culturally-responsive mindset rooted in their identities and experiences**. As one fellow put it, “It’s what I’ve dedicated my whole life to.” Thus, few fellows suggested that they experienced much growth in this skill area during their first year in Influence 100.

Nevertheless, fellows noted that there was always room for growth, and some indicated that the program gave them opportunities to **solidify the foundations they brought with them**.

* One fellow said the program **confirmed and “continued to expand” their learning about equitable services** and equitable education.
* A couple of fellows indicated that **Influence 100 provided “language” that increased their awareness and understanding** of their experiences or of what they were “trained to do […] naturally.”
* Two fellows said that Influence 100 helped them to “**think more deeply about who is taking up space and who is not**.” One reported doing “a better job” at both noticing and making space for those who had not spoken. The other said the program gave them “the confidence to take up more space.”
* Two other fellows commented that it was beneficial to **share perspectives on this skill with a group of people with similar values** and similar backgrounds “who could relate” or, alternatively, could “broaden my own perspectives.”

#### Purposefully builds the capacity of others to identify and disrupt inequities in the school

Unlike the first focus skill, **this skill was one that** **most fellows expressed interest in developing**. Interactions related to equity with colleagues, bosses, community members, and staff from other districts were repeated topics in our conversations with Cohort 5 during fall and spring data collections. Some fellows shared examples of growth they made in this area through their participation in Influence 100, while others noted the **ongoing challenges they faced in terms of building awareness, capacity, and willingness among others to make change for equity**.

The fellows who reported growth in this skill area described **learning different ways to approach conversations with others** about bias and inequity, in part by shifting their own perspectives   
 (see also “Communicating the message,” above).

* One fellow said that the program helped them to **gain an understanding of “how leaders work and how different people think”** which allowed them to be “more forgiving” of people making inequitable decisions and “gives me the space [...] to create some opportunities for these leaders […] to really grow, instead of me feeling frustrated.”
* Another fellow talked about **stepping back to understand the information structurally available** to the other party as a way to reduce the fellow’s feelings of defensiveness and to shift to a “bird’s eye view” and increase mutual understanding.
* Two other fellows talked about Influence 100 helping them to **approach problematic situations as opportunities to educate others**, rather than instances where a relationship might be ended (e.g., with a guest presenter) or where “shame or guilt or blame” might be used. Fellows credited this learning to conversations with other Cohort 5 fellows and with facilitators. As one fellow noted, “Darcy is really good at problem solving and continually refocusing on positionality and forcing us to think from a different place in the continuum.”

**Some fellows reported that they did not grow in this skill area** and felt that Influence 100 had not yet given them tools to address challenges they continued to face in their current roles in terms of building the capacity of others around equity.

* One fellow recounted **repeatedly having their suggestions dismissed because of their identity**, “I bring up these things [… and] it doesn’t go anywhere. And I don’t know that I’ve learned any new tools [from Influence 100] to help me have it go anywhere.”
* Another fellow noted feeling empowered by the opportunity to talk to educational leaders during site visits, but commented, “There was nothing that mind blowing in terms of *how* to have these conversations. There was nothing really new that set off a light bulb in my head.”

#### Confronts and alters institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with minoritized populations

Of the three focus skills, fellows had the least to say about growth in this institutional/systemic-level skillset.[[6]](#footnote-7)

* Some fellows actively identified this skill as an area where they wanted more from the program.
* A few fellows reported feeling **empowered to take action at the institutional level**, including one who recounted moving to “the doing stage” of a project.
* A few fellows reported **approaching situations differently**, thanks to tools or learning from Influence 100. One of these fellows said they “thought about things systemically [and] would look at things through that lens in every decision,” and focused their energy on building and leveraging relationships as a way to use what is working to make progress and iterate over time.
* Reflecting on this skill, one fellow commented that they had **grown through thinking about and wrestling with “such a dauting task.”** At the same time, this fellow said that they **continued to feel “powerless and helpless**.”

“I've grown some. But I wouldn't say that the program has given me a strategic way to diplomatically and politically address student inequity of school experience. It's just like, ‘Yeah, it's a problem that can't be solved, and we're in this together.’”

## Disconnect in Expectations

Fellows’ engagement in sharing feedback and suggestions about Influence 100 indicates that they support the program and are invested in improving it. At the same time, many expressed disappointment about their own gains after the first year.

This sentiment was complex, but it seemed to be based in misalignment between fellows’ priorities and expectations and the program team’s goals and strategies. In some cases, fellows explicitly recognized a disconnect; in other cases, fellows’ identification of ways in which the program had not satisfied their interests indicated a lack of alignment between what they were seeking and what DESE set out to provide.

Given that working toward equity in education is experienced as an uphill battle—because of the entrenched nature of systemic racism—the hope and promise embedded in the existence of an initiative such as Influence 100 translated into a context where mismatched priorities could lead to frustration and disappointment for fellows.

The disconnect between fellows’ ambitious expectations and the actual structure and content provided through the initiative appeared to be influenced by the following factors:

* **Varied needs and priorities among fellows:** Priorities differed among fellows with different experiences, knowledge, and identities. Fellows entered the program with a range of rich backgrounds and existing competencies. They arrived via different career paths and had different training experiences. With different roles and career ambitions, their interests and needs varied widely. They did not seem to have enough information in advance about program structure and content to help them understand how their own priorities might align with the goals and potential outcomes of the program, or with the priorities of other participants.
* **Big expectations:** Fellows had very ambitious expectations for Influence 100, related to 1) their deep personal commitment to and investment in addressing educational inequities and 2) their experience with and understanding of the harm educational inequities are causing and the pervasiveness of the problem. Most fellows described a personal investment in the goals of Influence 100, rooted in their own experiences (and the experiences of their children and loved ones) of racialized harm and inequitable access to educational opportunity. The program’s existence thus seemed to inspire hope and expectancy. Many approached Influence 100’s stated objectives with an understandably high sense of urgency—as something that has been far too long in coming. Fueled by this sense of urgency, fellows expected a lot out of Influence 100, and they struggled to reconcile their lofty expectations with the on-the-ground reality of the 2-year program’s potential and constraints.
* **Program focus on cultural competence and responsiveness:** Many fellows expressed concern and confusion about having cultural competence be such a programmatic focus, given their identities. This focus made them question whether they understood the program’s goals or target population. To some fellows, the focus suggested a curriculum designed for a different audience (one that did not have deep personal and professional experience with racial inequity). Because of this, some fellows felt that the skills and backgrounds they brought to the program as BIPOC educational leaders were not being adequately considered. For example, one fellow said: “When people talk to me about cultural competence and responsiveness, someone with my background can feel that I'm being questioned about something that I’m really doing anyways, that I cannot afford *not* to because of my background.” Instead, this fellow and others wanted to spend more time discussing how to overcome the barriers and challenges they faced as they tried to *implement* culturally responsive practices.

The next section, What Needs to be Clarified, delves into the misalignment between fellows’ expectations and their experiences by identifying areas where additional clarity might improve their experience. Also, fellows’ varied list of suggestions for program structure provides additional evidence and perspective on this misalignment (see the Fellows’ Suggestions section below and details in Appendix E).

## What Needs to be Clarified

As we’ve noted, fellows’ commentary about Influence 100 suggests that they simultaneously supported the program’s existence and continuation even as they expressed dissatisfaction with aspects that were misaligned with their expectations. Some fellows were more explicit than others in noting that their experience would have been improved by having a clearer set of guidelines for what to expect in the program. They named aspects for which they wanted clarification that ranged from the broad overarching goals of the program to the specifics of particular aspects of pre-work.

* For example, at a broad level, one fellow thought it would be important to know, “What do I get out of this deal? I've invested two years, by the time the program is done. What do I gain from this?”
* Another fellow admitted to hoping that the program would teach them “the fix to this” intractable system of inequity and expressed discouragement and disappointment at continuing to feel that “it’s such a daunting task” with “no clear solution.”
* This same fellow, who had invested time and energy in pre-work that ultimately was not discussed, wanted clarity about expectations for fellows’ engagement with those assignments—were they optional or necessary for session participation?

Listening to fellows and analyzing their responses, we identified specific areas where fellows’ experience could benefit from clear and explicit expectation-setting to address the disconnect some are feeling. The following list incorporates topics raised by fellows and around which they expressed confusion or a desire for more information, as well as topics we identified through our analysis as needing greater transparency.

* **What fellows should expect to gain from participation** in Influence 100, both during and after the program. (For example, in what ways will they be better positioned to secure a superintendent job after completing the program?)
* **The content the Influence 100 curriculum covers**, and the pacing of the curriculum. As discussed above, fellows came into the program with expectations regarding the content that would be covered. However, they did not have a clear point at which they could compare their expectations to the planned curriculum and reconcile those expectations. At times, activities felt rushed to fellows, who did not have a sense of the priorities that were driving the time allocations or a “pacing guide” for the instruction.
* **The “end product” of the action research project**, including examples and specifics of what fellows would be supported in and responsible for producing.
* **The role of fellows’ districts in Influence 100**. Specifically, fellows want to understand what their relationship with their district can and should be as an Influence 100 fellow, and what DESE’s relationship with their district is regarding the program and fellows' experiences.
* **The role of fellows and the role of districts in site visits**. Some fellows discussed concerns about hosts not being appropriately prepared to receive fellows, including not understanding what fellows would be looking for and asking about, and not having adequate training to avoid microaggressions against BIPOC fellows. Relatedly, fellows found that their ideas about their role as equity leaders visiting districts did not mesh with the guidance they received from facilitators about interacting with the host district. Fellows’ site visit experiences would be improved by additional transparency about roles and goals across hosts, fellows, and DESE.
* **DESE’s relationship to and role with districts, superintendents, and school committees** in relation to equity. Fellows operate with assumptions that may or may not be accurate about the influence of DESE on district policies and practices and DESE’s power to enforce standards and guidelines.
* **Measures of success for the Influence 100 program.** For example, what rate of retention for superintendents of color across the Commonwealth would indicate that the program was successful?
* **The roles and processes of DESE, TLA, and UMDI in gathering data for program improvement.** Fellows were asked to provide feedback on the program through data collections administered by TLA and UMDI (including session surveys, interviews, and focus groups), but distinctions between the data collections in terms of who would be reviewing the data and how the data would be used were not clearly explained to fellows.
* **“Who is this for?”** or the identities of fellows the program is suited to serve. Some BIPOC fellows expressed that the focus on cultural competence and responsiveness led them to conclude that the program was intended for white fellows, rather than for educators with their backgrounds and experiences.

## Fellows’ Suggestions

Cohort 5 fellows are thoughtful and ambitious and hold high standards for learning opportunities—including their own. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, fellows’ responses included direct and indirect suggestions for ways to build on and improve their experiences in Influence 100 and ensure the value and impact of the fellowship.

The prominent themes reflected in fellows’ suggestions are discussed throughout the body of the report, including in the What Fellows Missed section, which is focused on fellows’ ideas related to program content. We wanted to share fellows’ many specific suggestions related to program structure as well. In Appendix E, we organized these suggestions into the following categories: program administration and facilitation, session format, site visits, action research project, mentoring, cohort, and support for the job application process.

Recommendations and Insights

1. **Share information early to maximize opportunities for fellows to understand intended program outcomes and program structure while allowing for programmatic flexibility and adaptation.** Acknowledge variations in fellows’ expectations, priorities, strengths, and existing skill sets.

* **Clear expectation-setting is crucial**. Program leaders and participants need a shared understanding of what will be prioritized and how those priorities will be approached. Clarifying different parties’ priorities and identifying gaps in alignment are important first steps toward reconciling differences across DESE and fellows as well as among fellows with different experiences and knowledge.
* **Fellows are committed to and invested in equity work**; they are also practical and ambitious. Fellows are looking for a clear return on investment—they want to be sure what they are putting their time and effort into is worthwhile. They want to know in advance what they will gain from participating in Influence 100 and what they will not.
* **A combination of factors contributes to high and varied expectations** among fellows for the Influence 100 experience.
  + In their professional environments, many of the Cohort 5 fellows have been dismissed, ignored, discredited, minimized, and excluded.
  + A program like Influence 100 inspires hope that a different experience is possible—backed by the real and imagined power and authority of DESE and led by a woman of color.
  + The stakes are high. The fight for equity is on behalf of children. Many fellows consider this to be their life’s work.
  + The broadness of the program’s overarching goals, linked to longstanding inequities that extend far beyond the reach of DESE, leaves substantial room for fellows to anticipate a wide range of possibilities for program implementation.
* **Influence 100 cannot meet the needs or match the priorities of all aspiring superintendents**, who bring different strengths and existing skill sets, training experiences, and goals. DESE could use the application and selection process to specify what existing skills, prior training, and goals are the best match for the program—and would do well to revisit expectations with fellows throughout the program.

1. **Clarify and routinely revisit the program’s learning goals with fellows, especially in relation to their existing cultural competence.** Establish a shared understanding between fellows and program leadership about curriculum, learning goals, and focus skills**.**

* **Fellows expressed uncertainty about how the focus skills apply to educators of color.** Influence 100 leadership could explain their views on the skills’ relevance to aspiring BIPOC superintendents. One explanation that emerged from conversation between DESE and UMDI is a distinction between having cultural competence based on identity and experience and having the culturally responsive leadership skills necessary to be effective as equity-focused superintendents.
* **Fellows’ reactions to interview and focus group questions about the focus skills suggest they might not have interpreted the skills as the facilitators intended.** For example, fellows’ responses to questions about Skill 3 suggest that they might have been thinking about actions at the individual or interpersonal level related to “confronting and altering” rather than action on the level of structures and systems (*institutional* biases). Fellows could benefit from clarification of the distinctions between the three skills, including the association between the three skills and the three levels of action—individual, interpersonal, and institutional.[[7]](#footnote-8)

1. **Revisit the initiative’s relative prioritization of cultural competence and responsiveness versus superintendent preparation and/or consider differentiating program content for fellows with different identities.** Many fellows experienced a dissonance between their BIPOC identities and the programmatic emphasis on cultural competence and responsiveness—which they regard as a natural area of strength. They lamented a lack of emphasis on practical tools and strategies.

*“I'm a little confused about who the intended audience for the program is, especially with us talking so much about equity, but primarily the group are people of color… I'm a little bit frustrated that I'm being taught as if I'm [someone] who doesn't know how to teach black and brown kids, and the struggle of black and brown kids. I was that kid. Teach me how to keep the job.”*

* In these words and others, **fellows expressed that the first-year curriculum for Cohort 5 leaned too far toward a focus on cultural competence and responsiveness**, skills that many in the group already felt well-versed in. Meanwhile, many fellows felt stymied in their work to apply those existing skills to make change in their current contexts and indicated that Influence 100 could instead do more to **teach them how to navigate the “consequence or hand slapping” they faced when they tried to disrupt inequities**. They also expressed concern about developing the knowledge and practical skills needed to obtain and retain a superintendent position in an environment where they have observed the scrutinizing and/or exclusion of educators of color from leadership positions.
* **Some fellows expressed confusion about whether the initiative’s priority was training fellows to be culturally responsive leaders or training culturally responsive leaders to be superintendents.** Fellows’ feedback suggests a need for program leadership to clarify how they are prioritizing between these competing options: Should the priority be superintendent preparation for aspiring superintendents of color? Or should it be cultural competence and responsiveness with some superintendent preparation built in? Increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of superintendents may, as fellows suggest, depend on providing rigorous preparation for the job and hiring processes to educators of color. Creating more culturally responsive districts and leaders might be achieved through that same approach or through recruiting and training fellows who are not people of color to develop into culturally competent and responsive leaders. Differentiating program content for fellows with different identities could be a strategy to reconcile these seemingly competing priorities.

1. **Continue to strive for programmatic messaging that is hopeful yet realistic—that balances encouragement to embrace possible future gains with acknowledgement of current and future challenges.** The initiative is navigating a tension between encouraging leaders of color to pursue ambitious positions and acknowledging the extent of the challenges they are likely to face.

* As fellows are participating in Influence 100 and learning/preparing to be equity-focused superintendents, **they are dealing with inequities and discrimination, microaggressions, and resistance to and backlash against their efforts to make change in their current jobs**. Through Influence 100, fellows seek tools and strategies that they can apply immediately to overcome these challenges and also use to be more effective in their future equity-focused efforts.
* **Site visits can also include microaggressions and feelings of exclusion and discrimination** for fellows. These experiences can bring up past trauma and make fellows feel complicit in the inequitable treatment of students of color. Facilitators could hold preparatory sessions with fellows before site visits to establish the goals of the visit and debriefing sessions after the visits to acknowledge and collectively process observations and interactions.
* **Some fellows ended their first year in Influence 100 feeling that the job of a superintendent committed to equity seemed impossible.** (“The money and the headache that they give them, it's not worth it.”) However, some had the opposite response, indicating that they felt more motivated or compelled to “get a seat at the table.” (The program “strengthens my resolve to do this work.”)
* **Through Influence 100, fellows witnessed some of the limitations of DESE’s power to confront and alter institutional biases, and some struggled to make sense of this.** The program could include content that helps fellows understand the relationship between DESE and district governance and that lays out the interacting forms of governance that shape district policy and practice.
* **Influence 100 is building momentum over time.** Current fellows are aware of past fellows who are now in central office administration in their districts. This momentum could be facilitated by establishing a structure to connect the network of Influence 100 alumni and current fellows (e.g., a listserv, social media page, etc.). Such a structure could support communication and problem-solving to build on successful equity efforts and to encourage and support current and aspiring equity leaders to persist.

Appendices

**Appendix A:** Cohort 5 FY24 Programming Overview

**Appendix B:** Influence 100 Interim Brief: Fall 2023 Interviews – Cohort 5 Fellows

**Appendix C:** Spring 2024 Interview Protocol – Cohort 5 Fellows

**Appendix D:** Spring 2024 Focus Group Protocol – Cohort 5 Fellows

**Appendix E:** Fellows’ Suggestions

1. https://www.doe.mass.edu/csi/diverse-workforce/influence100.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The Influence 100 Evaluation began in 2020, as Cohort 1 began their second year of the fellowship. It has evolved over the years to align with DESE’s priorities for learning about Influence 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. A separate report on the findings from the fall interviews is in Appendix B. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Two remaining fellows had not participated in fall interviews and were not contacted about the focus groups. They had had minimal engagement in the program at that point, and we confirmed this selection choice with DESE. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See Fall 2023 Interview Brief (Appendix B) for details about sampling and selection. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Fellows may not have interpreted the focus skills the same way program facilitators intended. For example, several fellows seemed to consider “confronting and altering” on a personal/individual level rather than institutional/systemic level. Additional reflections on this are in the Recommendations and Insights section. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. At the May 2024 Partners in Equity Leadership Conference, Mary Rice-Boothe framed three levels of competencies in equity leadership as individual, interpersonal, and institutional. The three focus skills map onto these competencies with Skill 1 (Acts with cultural competence and responsiveness) as individual, Skill 2 (Builds the capacity of others to identify and disrupt inequities) as interpersonal, and Skill 3 (Confronts and alters institutional biases) as institutional (or structural or systemic). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)