Reimagining

MIDDLE SCHOOL

How Salem Public Schools used Student Experience Data to Transform Eighth Grade

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many districts sought to redesign the middle school experience to make school more meaningful. For Salem Public Schools (PS) Superintendent Dr. Stephen Zrike Jr., it was more than a professional goal – it was a personal vision, too. His offices sit in the sixth-grade wing of Collins Middle School, so he is in the middle of their world and can easily interact with students. Unfortunately, he often heard that young people were uninterested in school. As a father of a middle schooler, he wanted to create conditions that would foster a new way of learning.

That growing need to reinvent became paramount after the pandemic.

The urgency around reimagining the middle school experience intensified in response to national reports of students struggling with the return to learning after COVID, including low levels of engagement, mental health issues, and academic learning loss. Salem PS also saw that trend within its own district and intentionally asked the community how it could do better for its students. When they surveyed the community, parents yearned for their children to have access to different ways of learning, and only one-third of students said school was a place they enjoyed and wanted to be. To reverse the trends, Salem PS decided to launch the Middle School Learning Pilot for 8th graders at Collins Middle School in order to design a new way of learning that addressed the needs of the students.

In partnership with **WPS Institute**, a nonprofit that works in education innovation, leadership at Salem PS—including Dr. Zrike and Dean of Innovation, Chelsea Banks—used the community's feedback to co-design and pilot new learning experiences that centered students and met their needs.

With buy-in from community members, parents, and importantly, students, Salem PS developed a learning vision that aimed to make students feel connected, empowered, and unbounded as learners. This led them to create a multi-disciplined new design that blended personalization, hands-on learning, and community involvement to meet students where they are.

Early in the process, the team identified that continuous learning would be crucial for the success of the pilot. WPS and Salem PS partnered with **Transcend** to better understand how students experienced the pilot using the Leaps Student Voice Survey. They employed the survey in two ways: to measure the success of the pilot over the course of the year, and as a pulse check given throughout the year for checking the success of rapid cycles of innovation.

The Leaps Student Voice Survey measures a school's ability to make the **10 Leaps for Equitable, 21st-Century Learning**, which describe the shift from an industrial-era, inequitable education to 21st-century, equitable learning experiences. The survey was designed specifically to measure the quality of student experiences by relying on an often under-utilized resource: the voices of students themselves. Salem PS focused on five specific Leaps tightly aligned with the goals of the pilot:

WHOLE-CHILD FOCUS

CONNECTION & COMMUNITY

ACTIVE SELF-DIRECTION

RELEVANCE

ANYTIME, ANYWHERE LEARNING

LEAPS FOR EQUITABLE 21ST CENTURY LEARNING

Transcend's Leaps for Equitable, 21st Century Learning describes the key ways we believe the student experience must change so that schools can prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the world. **Learn more here**.

INEQUITABLE, INDUSTRIAL-ERA LEARNING	EQUITABLE, 21ST-CENTURY LEARNING
Unequal Expectations & Opportunities	High Expectations with Unlimited Opportunities
Narrow Focus	Whole-Child Focus
Rote Activities	Rigorous Learning
Irrelevance	Relevance
Assimilation & Marginalization	Affirmation of Self & Others
Reinforcement of the Status Quo	Social Consciousness & Action
Isolation	Connection & Community
Inflexible Systems	Customization
Passive Compliance	Active Self-Direction
Siloed Schooling	Anytime, Anywhere Learning

"We knew we wanted something that would help us tell a broader story about impact in conversation with the rest of the field, so that's where Leaps came in for us," said WPS Executive Director, Laura Tavares. "The Leaps represent important shifts in education that a lot of people care about. We realized that we could use that survey as a way of measuring change around items that we were working on through our own impact framework."
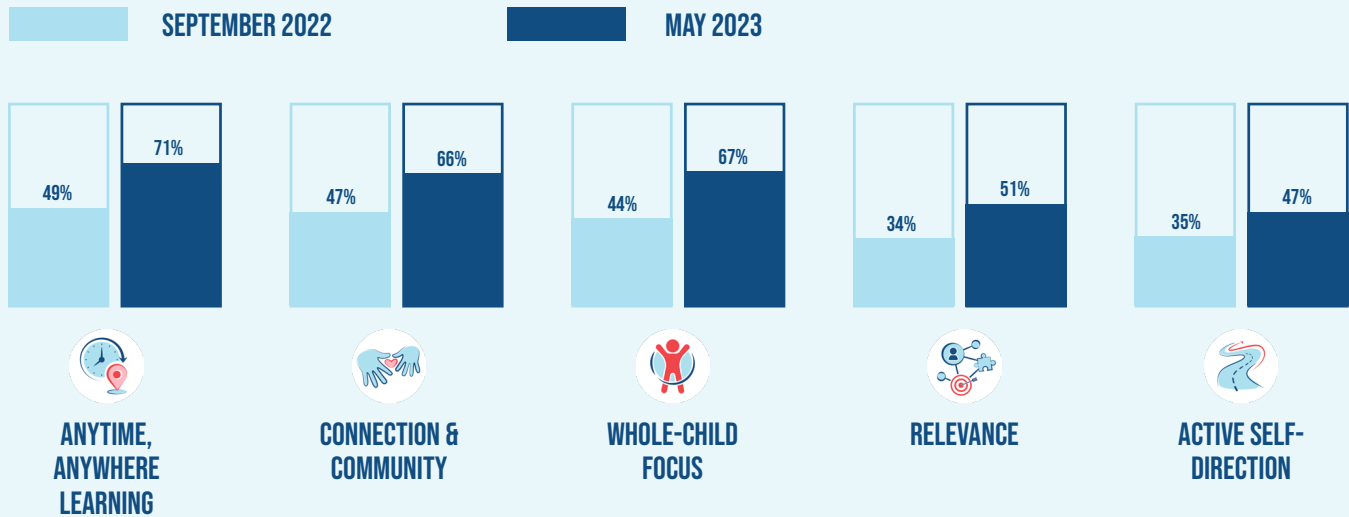
Students in the pilot took the Leaps Student Voice Survey at the beginning and end of the year. Salem PS and WPS also administered four shorter versions during mini-learning loops to understand what type of learning engagements resonated with students throughout the school year. WPS then took the quantitative data and combined it with evidence from student focus groups and interviews to get a richer understanding of what they were seeing and hearing. All this data helped pinpoint positive impact and areas for growth. Based on the success seen last year, Salem PS is expanding the pilot from just 8th grade to also include 7th graders in the 2023-2024 school year. As Salem PS heads into year two of the pilot, they're again using the data to drive meaningful change for its students.

CHANGES IN STUDENT EXPERIENCE DURING THE PILOT

■ SEPTEMBER 2022   ■ MAY 2023

	ANYTIME, ANYWHERE LEARNING	CONNECTION & COMMUNITY	WHOLE-CHILD FOCUS	RELEVANCE	ACTIVE SELF-DIRECTION
September 2022	49%	47%	44%	34%	35%
May 2023	71%	66%	67%	51%	47%

REDESIGNING TO CENTER STUDENTS

The district knew it wanted the middle school experience to be different and that parent, student, and community collaboration needed to be fundamental. When setting goals for the pilot, Salem PS and WPS ensured they weren't only discussing the district's goals; they asked the learners and their parents what they hoped to be true for students.

Salem PS and WPS met with students, their parents, and community organizations to understand what they want from school, asking them: What does meaningful

STUDENT IMPACT FRAMEWORK

Together, Salem PS and WPS developed three high-level goals for the pilot:
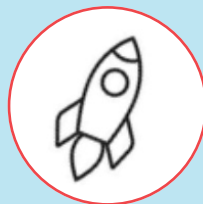
CONNECTED LEARNING

When students benefit from supportive relationships and contribute to their community.

EMPOWERED LEARNING

When students are aware of their interests and strengths, set personally meaningful goals, and drive their learning.
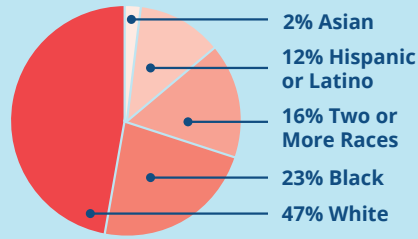
UNBOUNDED LEARNING

When students are consistently in a zone of engagement and making progress academically.
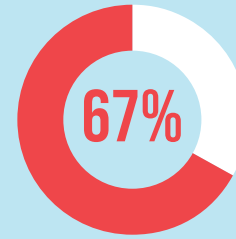
STUDENTS SERVED

40-45

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DEMOGRAPHICS

- 2% Asian
- 12% Hispanic or Latino
- 16% Two or More Races
- 23% Black
- 47% White

ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

67%

Free/Reduced Price Lunch

learning look like to you? How would you like to learn? What would it look like to partner with the community? Community feedback is reflected in the **high-level goals** for the pilot.

With the high-level goals set, the pilot focused on recruitment and enrollment. The pilot utilized an inclusive opt-in lottery system available to all Salem PS 8th-grade students. Over 70 students opted-in, and, from there, 40-45 learners were selected by lottery. The final demographics of the pilot were fully representative of the district.

The pilot's high-level goals were brought to life through specific **design principles**—intentional approaches to learning facilitation chosen to ensure students had a range of experiences. When thinking through ways to make students feel empowered, connected, and unbounded by their learning, they utilized a medley of principles—personalized, community-based, and hands-on learning—that combined to support their goals.

HIGH-LEVEL GOALS	GOALS SPAN KEY DESIGN PRINCIPLES
CONNECTED LEARNING	
EMPOWERED LEARNING	PERSONALIZATION
	COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING
	HANDS-ON LEARNING
UNBOUNDED LEARNING	

PERSONALIZATION

Personalization is most prevalent in math and English language arts as a method to allow students to progress at their own pace. Through the use of data-driven learning platforms like Zearn, Aleks, and No Red Ink, students gain access to learning plans that adapt to their progress. With the support of this software, teachers develop rigorous learning experiences that are catered to the students' interests, preferences, and mastery levels. For example, when using No Red Ink, students were able to choose books aligned with their interests and select how to respond to their comprehension tasks. Those tasks had to include a writing element, but students could choose to create timelines, posters, maps, or storyboards to represent their learning.

Personalization also included students setting goals, reflecting on their progress through peer and teacher check-ins, and leading conferences with their families to update them on their development.

Personalization has been a key lever of success for many participants in the pilot. "It pretty much really helps you focus on what you need to work on, rather than what everyone else needs to work on," one student shared. "That was a big issue for me at the end of the year. I already understood almost everything we were starting with, while some people didn't. And the implementation of Aleks and stuff was a huge help because it put me where I'm at, not where other students are, because then I can actually be able to further progress instead of just being at a plateau."

"

Studio is really fun and engaging. It challenges your creativity. It gives you the opportunity to be yourself and make things you wouldn't be able to do in a regular classroom. And you get lots of opportunities.

PILOT STUDENT

> "I used to think school was structured and had to be done in a certain way....But now I think it's more free for you to take into your hands and learn in many different ways.

PILOT STUDENT

COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING

Community-based learning is at the heart of the pilot's social studies curriculum. The team designed learning immersions to develop more relevant and connected experiences. Learning immersions provide students with the opportunity to venture into the community to explore rich community assets and to understand the complex challenges facing Salem. Students also get a chance to connect the learning they do in the classroom with aspects of the outside world.

During the school year, learners explored the literature of The Harlem Renaissance. Instead of only hearing from their instructional leader, they went into the community and visited the Peabody Essex Museum to learn from local historians and see artifacts firsthand.

"Because in class when you learn things, you learn it, but you don't really learn it, learn it. Like when you're in class, you learn about the Harlem Renaissance," a student stated. "But then when you really go and you look at the photos of the people, you read their stories that you didn't get to read before, you can look at artifacts and stuff, and it really like gives you a bigger picture in your mind and makes you really think about it more and experience more what it might have been like."

HANDS-ON LEARNING

The pilot also included hands-on learning experiences through design studio, a highly collaborative workspace for students that uses inquiry-based learning. In one studio focused on physics, students created roller coasters using materials in the classroom in an attempt to get a marble to the finish line. For this project—and all studios—students were given a brief that

introduced the topic. They then had to brainstorm ideas and conduct research to better understand the concept. Learners sketched ideas, developed prototypes, and engaged in iterative processes to help them refine their product before presenting the final version.

REAL-TIME ITERATION TO UNDERSTAND WHAT WORKS

Though developing the goals and design of the program was crucial, Banks and Tavares thought it was equally critical to understand what was working in the pilot, what should continue, and aspects that could change. To assess the success of the core experiences, the team relied on Transcend's Leaps Student Voice Survey.

The Leaps Student Voice Survey is grounded in Transcend's 10 Leaps for Equitable, 21st Century Learning, which describes how schools can move from inequitable, industrial models of school to learning environments that prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the world. By design, the Leaps Student

ABOUT THE LEAPS STUDENT VOICE SURVEY

The Leaps Student Voice Survey is designed to help communities understand the experiences of learners through the lens of the Leaps for 21st Century, Equitable Learning. It builds upon and extends beyond currently available surveys in several important ways:

☑ Focuses specifically on the quality of experiences young people are having in school.

☑ Avoids assumptions embedded in the traditional, standardized system of school, such as single-teacher classrooms, A-F grading systems, and age-grade cohorts.

☑ Prioritizes customizability to the unique contexts of communities. For example, the Leaps survey allows communities to disaggregate responses by any element of students' identities, not just federal census categories.

The survey was built in partnership with outside psychometricians, who have gathered significant evidence of its validity and reliability across diverse settings and student groups. **Read the Technical Report** to learn more.

Voice Survey is flexible enough to align with and support many frameworks. For example, the survey easily translated to the high-level goals for learning defined as connected, empowered, and unbounded.

THE PILOT'S HIGH-LEVEL GOALS	LEAPS FOR EQUITABLE, 21ST CENTURY LEARNING	
CONNECTED LEARNING	CONNECTION & COMMUNITY	WHOLE-CHILD FOCUS
EMPOWERED LEARNING	ACTIVE SELF-DIRECTION	RELEVANCE
UNBOUNDED LEARNING	ANYTIME, ANYWHERE LEARNING	

The Leaps Student Voice Survey can be administered in two ways. One application is a high-level version that touches on all 10 Leaps, which serves as a helpful diagnostic to understand broadly how students experience schools and prioritize areas for improvement. It can also be administered as a deep dive survey that allows schools to focus on specific, targeted Leaps that closely align with project goals. In both versions, students are asked a series of questions related to each Leap, which they answer on a 5-point scale.

The Middle School Learning Pilot used the Leaps Student Voice Survey in three distinct ways:

1. To establish a baseline and serve as a diagnostic for the pilot at the beginning of the school year so they could understand the starting point and pinpoint specific areas for growth.

2. To understand progress by the end of the school year. This allowed them to see high-level trends for key areas like connection to community, school enjoyment, and relevance.

3. To support rapid cycle iterations during the year. This helped them hone in on specific areas of focus for a short time period aligned with specific learning immersions or design studios they were testing.

Using the Leaps Student Voice Survey to assess the success of different learning strategies at various times throughout the year supported the pilot's focus on real-time innovation. It also allowed educators to look closely at one or two Leaps by asking more questions related to the specific area they're honing in on.

Banks and other educators within the pilot would come together to brainstorm ways to focus on particular Leaps, such as relevance. The team would look at the data, figure out what was working, and discover areas to innovate or reinforce aspects that would make it more relevant to learners.

"We really focused on relevance for a month. [Students' relevancy rating] was a number that didn't move at first," Banks said. "As we looked at the items, we asked 'how can we bring in more connections between students and the work in the world and help narrate that?'"

Dr. Ali Picucci led the Transcend team and worked closely with Salem PS and WPS to determine the best cadence for administering surveys and identifying focus Leaps. They would convene regularly to make meaning and disaggregate the data, looking for patterns to determine which innovations worked for whom and why and whose needs weren't being met.

"The other great thing about the Leaps Student Voice Survey is that you can disaggregate the data," Tavares said. "That's something we definitely want to lean into a little bit more and better understand what accounts for the different experiences that some kids are reporting."
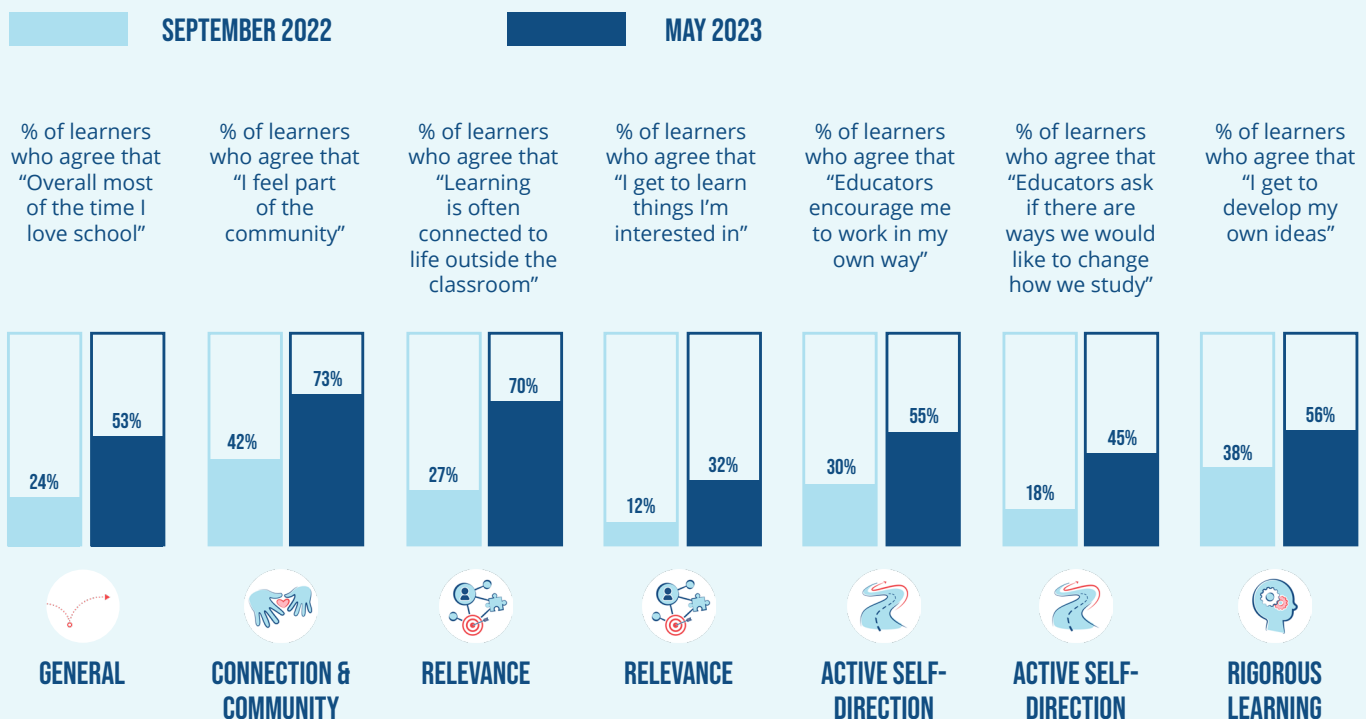
Understanding the student experience has been critical to advancing the pilot. In using the data from the Leaps Student Voice Survey, Salem PS and WPS leverage student voice to make changes that improve the student experience.

"I see lots of schools, teachers, and classrooms want to make improvements to their students' learning experiences. At the end of the day, it's very hard to understand if it really worked if you don't have some sort of tool to help support that," Dr. Picucci said. "So I think having a tool at their fingertips and building it into the DNA of how they structure their classroom gives them tremendous insight into what students think and how they experience their learning environments."

DATA COMING TO LIFE

Harnessing the survey as a tool to assess progress led to major improvements from the beginning to the end of the year.

CHANGES IN STUDENT EXPERIENCE DURING THE PILOT

SEPTEMBER 2022   MAY 2023

% of learners who agree that "Overall most of the time I love school"	% of learners who agree that "I feel part of the community"	% of learners who agree that "Learning is often connected to life outside the classroom"	% of learners who agree that "I get to learn things I'm interested in"	% of learners who agree that "Educators encourage me to work in my own way"	% of learners who agree that "Educators ask if there are ways we would like to change how we study"	% of learners who agree that "I get to develop my own ideas"
24% → 53%	42% → 73%	27% → 70%	12% → 32%	30% → 55%	18% → 45%	38% → 56%
GENERAL	CONNECTION & COMMUNITY	RELEVANCE	RELEVANCE	ACTIVE SELF-DIRECTION	ACTIVE SELF-DIRECTION	RIGOROUS LEARNING

The Leaps Student Voice Survey also served as a leading indicator for other key outcomes. For example, chronic absenteeism decreased by over 50% (from 28% to 12%) over the course of the year. This rate is compared to a chronic absenteeism rate of 23% for the middle school overall for the 2022-23 school year. Families were also very satisfied—100% of them said they would recommend the pilot to another family, which the district especially valued given their early decision to co-design the pilot with families.
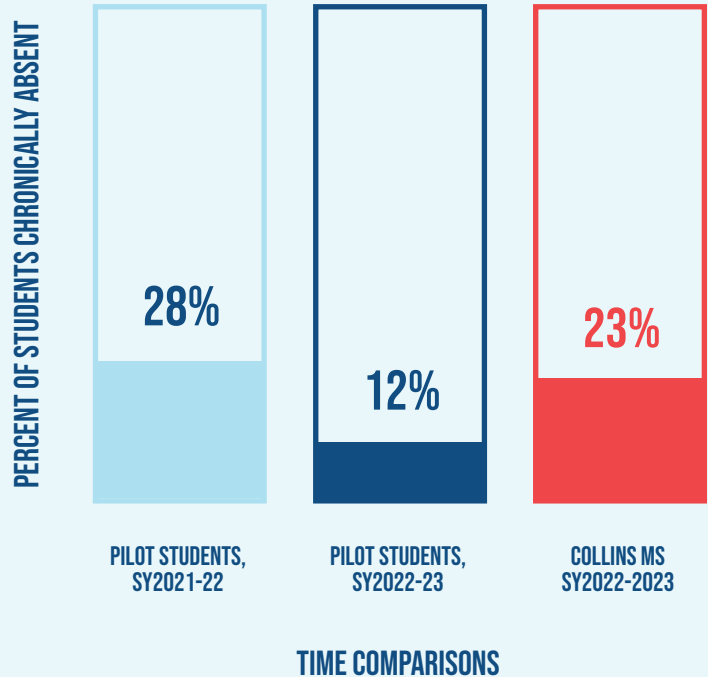
In launching the pilot, the team focused on Leaps Student Survey and attendance data to track the progress of how students experienced school. These leading indicators, along with interim academic assessment data, showed promise that the pilot was having a positive impact.
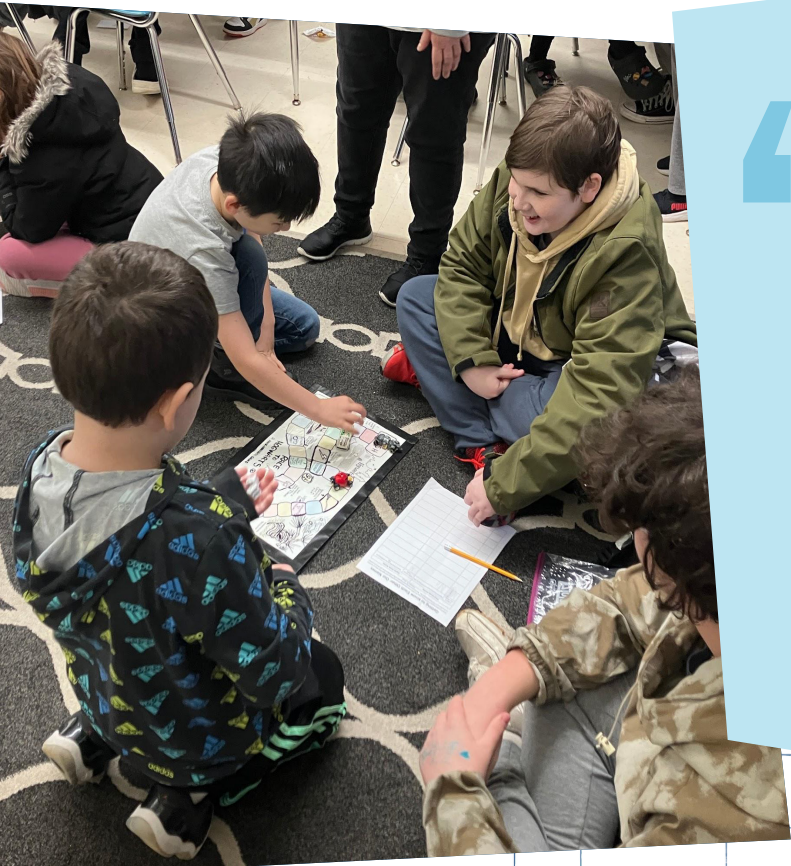
PARENT SATISFACTION WITH PILOT EXPERIENCE

100%

Parents satisfied with their student's Pilot experience

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM DECREASED FOR PILOT STUDENTS

PERCENT OF STUDENTS CHRONICALLY ABSENT

28%
PILOT STUDENTS, SY2021-22

12%
PILOT STUDENTS, SY2022-23

23%
COLLINS MS SY2022-2023

TIME COMPARISONS

> [The Leaps survey has] given us language and meaningful data as an educator team and also with our kids to be talking about what we're trying to do together on a much faster cycle and in a way that is meaningful to kids.

CHELSEA BANKS, DEAN OF INNOVATION

In contrast, research has documented that improving performance on lagging indicators like annual summative assessments can take multiple years. Generally, students in the pilot performed similarly to non-pilot students on Massachusetts' standardized state test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. Pilot students performed as well or better than the middle school as a whole in English language arts and science; in ELA, 31% of the pilot students met or exceeded expectations compared to 26% of the overall grade 8 students, while in science, 26% of the pilot students met or exceeded expectations compared to 23% of the overall grade 8 students. In math, while early interim data showed initial gains, overall 8th grade students performed better than the pilot students on the end of year assessment, with 14% of pilot students meeting or exceeding expectations compared to 21% school-wide.

Taken together, these data demonstrate that the pilot made a meaningful positive impact on student experiences, attendance, and parent satisfaction with no negative impact on academic outcomes. And in the long run, these leading indicators of improved experiences and engagement, combined with positive interim assessment data, suggest future improvements on annual tests for students in the pilot.

THE FUTURE OF THE LEARNING PILOT

The combination of qualitative and quantitative data has been an essential element in the success of the work. Families, students, and Salem PS administration view the pilot as an important milestone in their goal to provide better opportunities and outcomes for middle school students. The pilot is now heading into its second year and will grow to include approximately 90 students in 7th and 8th grades. Having stories from the students and meaningful data points has helped convey the effectiveness of the program to families, committees, school boards, and other key stakeholders.

For WPS, the data underscores the importance of this work, demonstrates the success of the program, and enables them to engage other partner communities.

Because the data served as an integral part of innovation, Salem PS and WPS will continue to use the Leaps Student Voice Survey in year two of the pilot as they welcome a new set of eager students. But they will still have the same goal: to make learning connected and unbounded so that students feel empowered.

"I love everything about this pilot. It really is the perfect place for me. We get to interact with things that you wouldn't normally get to in a regular classroom," a student said. "You get to experience outside of the classroom, which helps me because I always want to go places and do things and this program is perfect for that. It's all of everything that I needed, which is like a dream come true."

HOW SCHOOLS CAN USE THE LEAPS STUDENT VOICE SURVEY

DIAGNOSTIC AND PROGRESS MONITORING:
To establish a baseline to measure year-over-year success and identify areas of improvement.

RAPID-CYCLE R&D:
To provide quick, formative data to support rapid learning and development.

RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING:
To relay important information, like leading indicators of success, to various stakeholders who are invested in your district.

EXTERNAL STORYTELLING:
To generate evidence of impact that can be shared with external stakeholders.