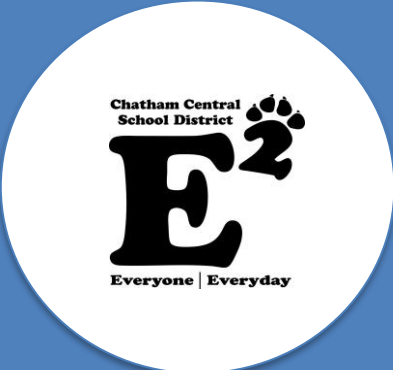


February 2024

**RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS IN THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC: *LESSONS FROM THE
NYKIDS EQUITY IN EDUCATION
COLLABORATIVE***



THE NYKIDS EQUITY IN EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE



A Note on Contributions:

This brief represents collective work undertaken by researchers, practicing professional educators, and improvement coaches from NYKids, Tech Valley High School (TVHS), Chatham Central School District (CSD), and the American Institutes for Research (AIR). We acknowledge the multitude of co-developed ideas and contributions of each of the individuals in our collaborative as well as all the educators and young people at TVHS and Chatham CSD who give this work meaning and purpose.



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Background

NYKids, is funded by the state of New York and housed in the University at Albany’s School of Education. It functions as a school improvement hub offering research and research utilization support to inform school improvement efforts.

NYKids’ staff partners with schools, districts, and other agencies and organizations, using variable models of Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) and Networked Improvement Communities (NICs). While RPPs have been defined and configured in a variety of ways (Coburn & Penuel, 2016), what most share is a commitment to the *generation and use of research through multi-way learning opportunities with partner organizations*. These opportunities are purposefully *designed to be sustained over time and intended to guide practice and policy changes*. NYKids fulfills many of these commitments and places a priority on multi-way mutual learning among and across partner organizations especially in the use of research to inform school and district wide change (Wilcox et al., 2017).

Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) are generally understood to be *intentionally designed social organizations with shared aims and processes for knowledge generation and utilization for continuous improvement* (Metz et al., 2020). They promote what some call “level C” learning as they are purposefully organized to encourage learning across organizations and ideally drawing from three knowledge bases: research knowledge (i.e., methods of inquiry), professional knowledge (i.e., knowledge of context, structures, processes, policies, practices), and improvement knowledge (i.e., methods for individual and organizational improvement) (Bryk et al., 2015).

Introduction to the Collaborative

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) has been committed to equitable education through rigorous research and evaluation, training, and technical assistance since its inception in 1946. In 2020, while in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, AIR undertook a new initiative called the *COVID-19 and Equity in Education Research Practice Partnership Network* (AIR, n.d.). One intention of networking RPPs was to focus researchers and practicing professionals on addressing differential impacts of the pandemic on youth, families, and communities and provide opportunities for sharing promising practices across the network.

Through this initiative, teams of educators, community members, and higher education research partners were invited to organize as RPPs—one of which, and the focus of this brief, included three organizations in upstate New York: NYKids, Tech Valley High School (TVHS), and Chatham Central School District (CSD). This is what we refer to as the NYKids Equity in Education Collaborative.

As shown in Figure 1, the AIR RPP Network included seven RPPs from four states (California, Florida, New York, and Washington):

- Lindsay Unified School District and their community partners (Lindsay, California)
- Miami-Dade County Public Schools and University of Miami (Miami, Florida)
- Black Liberation in Education, School, and Society (BLESS) Collective and their partners in the local school district(s) (New York, New York)
- Chatham Central School District, NYKids (Chatham, New York)
- Tech Valley High School (TVHS), NYKids (Albany, New York)
- Fallsburg Central School District and their community partners (Fallsburg, New York)
- Community Center for Education Results: Road Map for Project Region and their partners in the local school district(s) (Seattle, Washington)

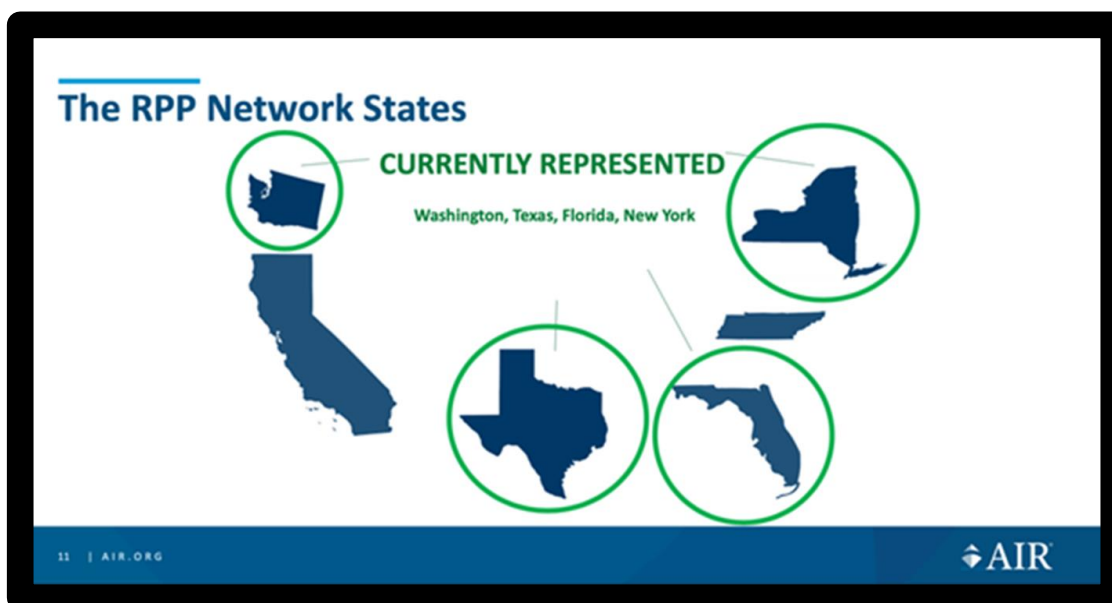


Figure 1. The AIR RPP Network States

NYKids Collaborative Development

Upon receiving information about the RPP opportunity in 2020 NYKids researchers, reached out to Chatham Central School District (CSD) and TVHS, to gauge interest in their participation in the AIR-sponsored RPP network.

Both partners were familiar with NYKids' approach to school improvement that relies on improvement science combined with NYKids positive outlier research, and both TVHS and Chatham CSD leaders were committed to addressing issues of equity in the context of the pandemic.

Our RPP team members (and as represented in Figure 2 from left to right) were:

- Kristen C. Wilcox, R&D Director, NYKids and Associate Professor, Educational Policy and Leadership, the University at Albany-SUNY
- Amy Hawrylchak, Principal and Chief Academic Officer, Tech Valley High School

- Beth Howard-Brown, Principal TA Consultant, AIR
- Tammie Causey-Konaté, Senior TA Consultant, AIR (on screen)
- Lisa Cala-Ruud, Director of Academics, Chatham Central School District
- Kate Jarrard, Coordinator for Grant Funded Programming and Accountability, Chatham Central School District
- Maria I. Khan, Postdoctoral Associate NYKids (2021-2023)
- Sara Hugger, Coordinator of School Outreach and Data Analysis, Tech Valley High School



Figure 2. RPP Members

Other team members not in the image:

- Jessie Tobin, Research Assistant, NYKids, and Doctoral Student, University at Albany, Educational Policy and Leadership

Initial Aim Setting and Improvement Initiatives

While Chatham CSD and TVHS are situated in very different contexts, leaders in both settings shared similar concerns about barriers to youth learning and engagement during the pandemic.

As NYKids research (e.g., Leo et al., 2023), along with other studies revealed (e.g., Kuhfeld et al., 2020), many of these barriers related to circumstances youth experience in their homes and communities as well as in their schools, calling for a holistic and context-sensitive approach.



Figure 3. RPP Goal and Aim

As a first step, TVHS and Chatham CSD team members did some digging into causes of problems youth were experiencing through student and parent surveys, focus groups, and interviews. From this, TVHS and Chatham CSD developed a shared goal and aim statement (See Figure 3).

Structuring Collaborative Activity

RPP members then engaged in monthly meetings, AIR-hosted virtual watercooler events, an AIR convening at their office in Chicago, IL, a NYKids continuous improvement “data dive” event on the TVHS campus, an AIR visit to the New York RPP sites, and a final virtual commencement celebration on December 14, 2023.

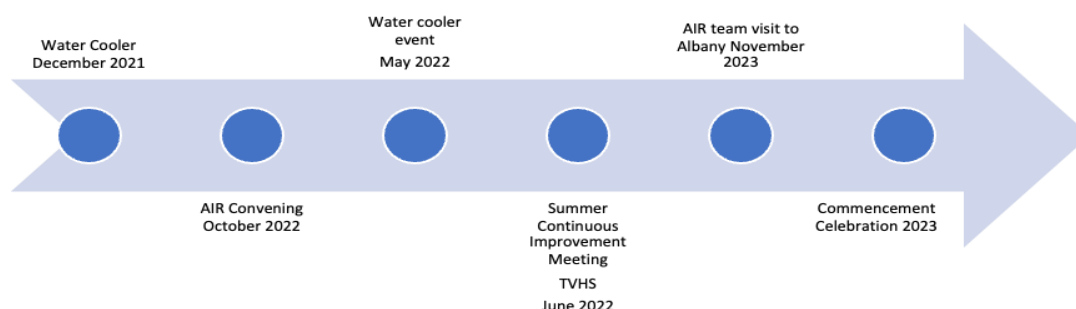


Figure 3. Timeline of RPP Events

In these events the NYKids collaborative used “*boundary practices*” (i.e. activities that “*bring together multiple participants with varying roles, perspectives, experiences, and areas of expertise*”) (Farrell et al., 2022, p. 198) including co-generating meeting agendas, crafting near-term objectives, sharing results and articulating next action steps to keep moving improvement work along. Our collaborative also used “*boundary objects*” – the “*materials and conceptual tools used in a partnership that are critical for joint activity*” (Farrell, et al., 2022, p. 199). These included NYKids research studies, continuous improvement tools (e.g., causal diagrams), and improvement workbooks — all located in a shared folder so that everyone could have access and contribute.

Both TVHS and Chatham CSD used different improvement tools to help guide decisions they made about what they could achieve realistically considering staff and student needs and capacity. They each chose one driver to focus their efforts, one process they wanted to change, and one short improvement cycle they wanted to test out.

As described in detail in the vignettes below, TVHS focused their attention on increasing students’ feelings of safety and comfort with peers and staff members and encouraging staff to invest in sustaining a positive learning environment for all. Chatham CSD sought to systematize opportunities for a diverse array of individuals to have voice in improvement initiatives.

Learnings and Future Directions

We crafted the following research questions at the beginning of our collaborative's formation to guide our inquiry:

1. What are the individual and collective learning outcomes of the university-school RPP regarding identifying an equity-oriented aim, articulating a theory of improvement, and engaging in disciplined inquiry?
2. How does networking school teams situated in demographically dissimilar contexts influence collective learning outcomes?
3. To what extent does the university-school RPP meet its student outcome objectives?

The discussion above points to evidence from both Chatham CSD and TVHS about the effects of our collaborative on their abilities to focus attention on equity-oriented goals and aims. Also, as described in more detail in the vignettes below, both schools showed the ability to articulate a theory of improvement and engage in disciplined inquiry around a problem of practice (Leo et al., 2023b; Wilcox et al., in press).

Regarding our second research question, TVHS and Chatham members responded to a survey initiated in the beginning of the 2023 school year. The open-ended question asked them to share “*comments or suggestions about our RPP collaborations*” in relation to the first two of our research questions. In response, one team member responded:

For my school, it was very helpful for us to plan with our partners at UAlbany providing the support for goal setting. Our outcome was a procedure in place for goal setting and time set aside for the work. I think the benefit of dissimilar schools working together is gaining a thought partner, which is a need for small schools.

Scaled survey responses (on a scale of not at all to very much) from two team members showed that both felt the RPP experiences had “very much” improved their:

- ✓ Ability to develop a shared vision of priorities around equity with other members of your school/district leadership team;
- ✓ Ability to identify potentially effective levers to improvement based on research conducted within your own setting or from outside research; and
- ✓ Ability to engage in disciplined inquiry around problems of equity as a collective within your school or district.

On survey items one and four (Q1: Ability to compare practices in own school with those of other schools in the local [NYKids-affiliated] and national [AIR-affiliated] network to identify areas for improvement in relation to equity aims; Q4: Ability to develop goals/aims with an equity focus) one team member indicated “somewhat” and the other “very much.”

Despite having different configurations, community demographics and needs, and capacities for improvement, the work in the NYKids collaborative set the stage for TVHS and Chatham CSD to continue to build capacity to address issues of equity. Some key learnings when working

collaboratively across the boundaries of universities and schools in addressing issues of equity are...

- Take time to acknowledge power differentials, set norms, and reflect on roles and leadership styles.
- Be conscious of whose voices are present, and whose are not, and why.
- Work from and through shared aims vs personal/political agendas to accelerate learning.

Conclusion

As we conclude this work, we reflect on evidence that the RPP structure and its focus on equity promoted innovation and improvements for both TVHS and Chatham CSD. We also recognize the numerous challenges (e.g., resource mobilization) to developing and sustaining infrastructure for collaborative work as outlined in recent frameworks (The Collaborative Education Research Collective, 2023). In the end, working across a local and national level through AIR's RPP Network, our NYKids collaborative was enriched with new ideas and much-needed structure.

Vignette 1: Chatham's Improvement Journey

Chatham Central School District (CSD) is a small, rural district located about a half hour southeast of Albany, NY with small but growing racial diversity. Of the 900 students that attend Chatham, 46% are economically disadvantaged, 19% are classified with disabilities, and 3% are English language learners.

The collaboration between AIR, NYKids, and Tech Valley High School began at a time when the Board of Education passed a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Policy in a climate of polarizing opposition to mask mandates and vaccinations required for sports. The turmoil and frustration with the pandemic cast a shadow on policy adoption, albeit successful. In this context, our focus for equity work began with investigating how to start and structure mediated, productive conversations that allow for community voice when there is a vocal minority with polarizing viewpoints.

Through collaborative discussions, along with a reduction in COVID-related regulations, we began to recognize that this organized minority ultimately was disconnected from the broader community. We also noticed that COVID-19 disrupted norms to the extent that district leaders and teachers were often working in a siloed and reactive, instead of collaborative and proactive, environment.

In the spring of 2022, the equity issue we prioritized shifted to renewing connections and belongingness for staff and students in anticipation for the fall term. This problem was tackled in a multi-prong approach beginning with providing resources and opportunities for staff, students, and leaders to engage in learnings and activities around belonging.

In the summer of 2022, the entire district-level administrative team partnered directly with NYKids in an improvement science workshop that walked the leaders through user-centered systems review and causal analysis. This small team created their own aim statement to set the foundation for improvement work around belonging and created an action plan focusing on collaboration, communication, and data.

This work spilled into the AIR/NYKids/TVHS collaborative in that we were intentionally attempting to build capacity in the leadership team to support improvement initiatives to better outcomes for our student (see Figure 5 for Chatham CSD team member share out at AIR convening Fall 2022).

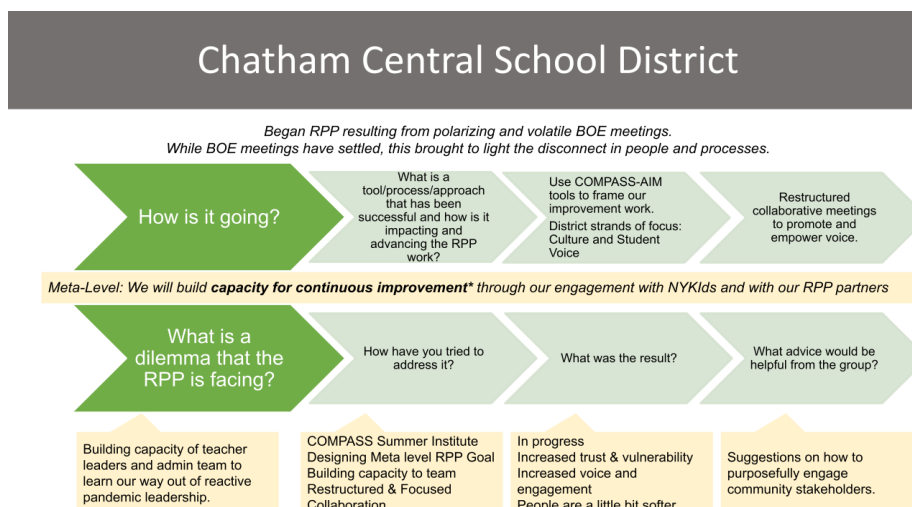


Figure 5. AIR RPP Chatham Share Out

The efforts towards belonging for faculty and staff were demonstrated in several initiatives. Teachers previously commented on how they work in a small district but have little time to meet and collaborate with their peers from other buildings. In response, the administrative team built two opportunities for district-wide collaboration. First, all teachers and teaching assistants participated in faculty voice committees. Topics were sourced from staff survey, teacher leader, and administrator input, and faculty selected their interested problem of practice. The meetings were structured with inquiry-based prompts to flexibly guide the work, and administrators were available for any questions and/or permissions. Time was carved out of professional development days to honor the work, and the results were a mix of investigations, proposals, and actual products. A committee fair and faculty pot-luck luncheon was organized to celebrate the work. All staff also had the option of participating in faculty-led book studies. Books were selected through alignment with district initiatives and by teacher suggestions.

Building principals held multiple focus group sessions for faculty and students to provide input on what was going well and what needed some attention. The administrators received the feedback and worked in their buildings towards corrective actions, as needed. Professional development days were also more targeted towards identified teacher needs to improve belonging and culture in their classrooms to better support students. To provide more opportunities directly to students, club offerings were expanded to accommodate a wider variety of interests.

The AIR/NYKids/TVHS collaboration was important to Chatham CSD's success in that they acted as thought partners and provided resources. The results of this opportunity are numerous, including both wins, challenges, positive impacts, and applied learning towards next steps. Chatham CSD began to adopt the improvement science process as a path out of the chaos of the pandemic. The 2022-2023 school year alone set the foundation for data-driven inquiry work in the district, which continued in the broader leadership team along with smaller pockets of various investigations. A smaller, targeted equity inquiry team was created to be part of a new

three-year network improvement community, collaborating with schools from across the nation to dig deeper into the work that AIR teed up for us.

The Chatham CSD leadership team has recognized the power of listening to and learning from the experiences and collective understandings of others. Opportunities for stakeholder voice have increased by using quantitative and qualitative surveys, focus groups, and empathy interviews, and the results have led to purposeful actions. Student voice has become the primary focus in diversity-equity-inclusion work, beginning from a place of belonging.

In sum, at Chatham CSD:

Wins

- Promoting voice through restructured meetings, committees, and professional development
- Productive meetings
- Task accountability increasing
- Improving data-driven inquiry work
- Preparation and pathway towards working with other collaborators

Adaptations

- Meetings revamped instead of canceled
- Meetings created for specific topics as needed
- Leadership desire to set goals

Challenges

- Meeting norms sourced, not revisited
- Meeting intentions unclear
- Improvement work not prioritized

Importance and impact in work

- Power in listening to and learning from the experiences and collective understandings of others (Looking outside our school walls)
- Improvement science process – a path out of the chaos of the pandemic
- Thinking about DEI work from perspective of student voice and starting from a place of belonging

Applied Learning and Next Steps for Chatham CSD

- Bringing data-driven collaborative improvement work into mixed teacher/administrator groups
- Continuing network/collaborative work with schools interested in improving equity and student outcomes
- Building an equity inquiry team, intentional listening to stakeholders through focus group and 1:1 interviews, and more widespread surveys with the goal to provide an opportunity for all to have a voice. Two questions we are exploring:
 - How can we make our school district more human-centered?
 - How can we empower youth?
- Utilize stakeholder voice to create desired profile of new leaders and staff

Vignette 2: TVHS’s Improvement Journey

TVHS is a regional public high school located in upstate New York. Educators and school leaders at TVHS have been trying to ensure that their 140 students coming from 31 sending districts feel a sense of belonging — especially challenging during the pandemic.

The TVHS staff perceived belongingness as critical while observing disparities in TVHS application and attrition rates by race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status even prior to the pandemic. Of the 140 TVHS students, 23% identify as students of color, and 36% identified as students with disabilities, and while TVHS seeks to be more inclusive of diverse students, it is required to use a lottery system for enrollment.

Through engagement in the RPP, TVHS staff developed an equity-oriented aim statement (below):

AIM: Improve the onboarding process to include more student and caretaker voice and to improve understandings of the TVHS commitment prior to attendance.

AIM 1: To increase student agency.

AIM 2: To diversify the student population who graduates.

TVHS staff conducted onboarding interviews from all freshmen for the class of 2025 and 2026 to better understand student perspectives. These interviews were conducted by seniors. The onboarding interviews were intended to build community and encourage honesty. Each transcript was anonymized before review by faculty using the See, Think, Wonder protocol. This encouraged faculty to SEE student data, THINK (analyze trends over the course of several meetings), and WONDER about next steps.

Like Chatham CSD’s team, TVHS team members presented the status of their improvement work at the AIR convening in the fall of 2022 (see Figure 6).

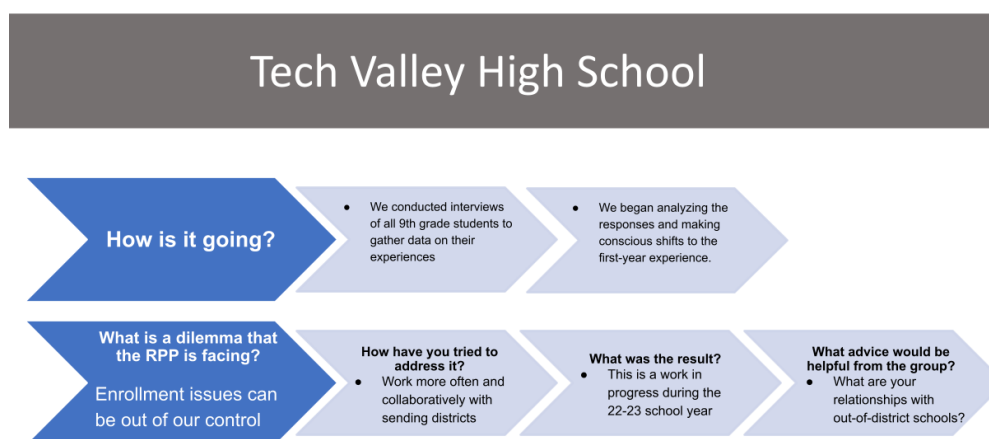


Figure 6. AIR RPP TVHS Share Out

In sum, at TVHS:

Wins

- Deepened relationships between students across grade levels
- Data gathered from interviews validates our efforts toward building a positive culture
- Faculty were invited in to review and interpret data

Adaptations

- Faculty focus has shifted from agency to collaboration – how are the two related?

Challenges

- With increased diversity, increased need for explicit instruction about equity and inclusion

Applied Learning and Next Steps for TVHS

During the academic year of 23-24, TVHS's goal has been to authentically assess student collaboration in a greater capacity. In November 2023, third party interviews were conducted across all grade levels. Data was shared with teachers and professional learning was held/action was taken to improve collaboration assessment.

RPP Related Research, Presentations, and Blogs

Research

- Wilcox, K.C., Hower, L., Hawrylchak, A., Tobin, J. & Khan, M.I. (in press) Lessons on closing the “Belongingness Gap” from a Regional High School’s Research-Practice Partnership.

Presentations

- Tobin, J. & Wilcox, K.C. (2024, April). *Centering student and educator voice: A Regional High School’s improvement journey to belonging*. American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA.
- Wilcox, K.C., Khan, M.I., & Tobin, J.T. (2023, April). *Addressing differential impacts of COVID via a national Research-Practice Partnership Network* [Poster]. Carnegie Foundation Summit on Improvement in Education <https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/Carnegie-Summit-Poster-2023.png>
- Khan, M.I. & Wilcox, K.C. (2023, March). *Improving educational equity through Research-Practice Partnerships and university-school collaborations in the post-pandemic*. Comparative and International Education Society Conference. <https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CIES.AIR-RPP.2023.pdf>

Blog Posts

- October 3, 2023. [Colleagues from the American Institutes for Research visit UAlbany, Chatham, and Tech Valley High School](#) by Aaron Leo, Lisa Graham-Donato, Jessie Tobin, Kristen C. Wilcox
- February 13, 2023. [Improving Educational Equity through Research-Practice Partnerships](#) by Maria I. Khan, Kristen C. Wilcox, Jessie Tobin and Aaron Leo
- October 11, 2022. [Focusing Collective Efforts on and for Equity: AIR RPP-Network Convening](#) by Maria I. Khan & Kristen C. Wilcox
- July 1, 2022. [What Are We Trying to Accomplish? Simple Questions to Guide Summer Continuous Improvement and 2022-23 Planning](#) by Kristen C. Wilcox
- May 6, 2022. [Chartering Ways Forward: Educational Equity and Cultural Responsiveness](#) by Maria I. Khan & Kristen C. Wilcox
- January 28, 2022. [Partnering with a Purpose: Educational Equity and Cultural-Responsiveness](#) by Maria I. Khan & Kristen C. Wilcox

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