Preliminary Findings of the Creative Corridor Center for Equity's Focus Research Project

By Circe Stumbo, Ed.M., M.A., Deanna Hill, Ph.D., J.D., Kristine Lewis Grant, Ph.D.
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Introduction

In late 2014, the Creative Corridor Center for Equity (C3E) kicked off *Focus*, a project to help school districts recruit and retain staff of color. Three school districts in Eastern Iowa participated in a Design Team meeting the summer of 2015. At this meeting, we committed to investigate the effectiveness of known policy and practice interventions. We reached out to trusted researchers to help us understand the existing research base, which we found to be helpful but not sufficient. We subsequently designed a qualitative research study comprised of focus group interviews with current teachers of color, and individual interviews with former teachers of color in the three participating districts. This report describes the preliminary findings of our first set of interviews with current teachers of color, and suggests recommendations for the school districts.

Research Summary

Nationally and locally, schools have persistently struggled to hire and retain a teacher workforce that is demographically similar to their students and their communities by race and ethnicity. Schools also have struggled to eliminate experience and outcomes gaps between White students and students of color (Hemphill, 2010; Vanneman, 2009). There is evidence that having more teachers of color can help.

- ***Diversifying the teacher workforce by race and ethnicity is beneficial for students of color.***

A growing body of empirical evidence finds that teachers of color improve the academic outcomes and school experiences of students of color (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). A number of researchers found that students of color accrue academic benefits when taught by a same-race teacher (see Dee, 2004; Clewell et al, 2005; Hanushek, 1992; Evans, 1992; c.f. Ehrenberg et al, 1995). Likewise, several researchers discovered that increasing the percentage of teachers of color in a school produces positive academic gains for students of color overall, not just those taught by a same-race teacher (see, e.g., Ehrenberg and Brewer, 1995; Meire, 1993; Pitts, 2007).

Klopfenstein (2005) found that enrollment of Black students in Algebra II classes rose significantly as the percentage of Black math teachers increased, while Farkas (1990) identified that Black students taught by Black teachers had lower rates of absenteeism. England & Meier (1986) observed that increasing the percentage of Black teachers in schools reduces second generation discrimination (e.g., disproportionality in special education/gifted placement, suspension and drop-out, and matriculation to postsecondary education). Fraga et al (1986) determined that dropout rates went down and college matriculation rates went up in schools with high Hispanic enrollment when the proportion of Hispanic teachers increased. Hess & Leal (1997) found that large urban districts with high concentrations of teachers of color had higher overall college matriculation rates.

Students of color who see people of color in positions of power received a self-worth boost (Cole, 1986; King 1993; Waters 1989); are motivated to strive for social success (Smith 1989); and are less alienated (Graham, 1987).

- ***Diversifying the teacher workforce by race and ethnicity is beneficial for all students.***

There also is mounting evidence that increasing teacher diversity is beneficial for all students. A number of scholars argued that the principle of equality in a democratic society requires people of color in positions of authority (Cole 1986; Graham 1987; Irvine 1988; Matcznski & Joseph, 1989). Cherng and Halpin (2016) found that students of all races respond more favorably to teachers of color than to white teachers. Scholars also argued that White students experiencing people of color in positions of authority helps to dispel myths of racial inferiority (Irvine, 1988; Graham, 1987). Bartoli et al (2016) concluded that teachers of color play a significant role in the racial socialization of white students. Lamb-Sinclair, 2016 Kentucky Teacher of the Year, concurred: "It is difficult to believe generalized racist comments when a human being who defies them stands before you every day" (Strauss, 2016). Bristol (2015) argued that all students need teachers of color to prepare them be global citizens.

- ***Our knowledge of why teachers of color stay in, move within, or leave their district – or teaching altogether – is limited.***

According to Ingersoll and May (2011), "[e]mpirical research on minority teacher turnover has been limited, has had mixed findings, and, in general, has been inadequate to help us address the magnitude, determinants and consequences of minority teacher turnover, or understand the implications of retention and turnover for shortages" (p. 5, citing Achinstein et al., 2010). That said, we are able to report the last two decades have seen increased efforts to recruit teachers of color—especially in hard-to-staff schools—with the number of teachers of color more than doubling in the last two decades (Ingersoll & May, 2011).

- ***We recruited people of color into teaching but teacher of color turnover has increased.***

Teacher of color turnover is much higher than White teacher turnover, and has been increasing; from the late 1980s to 2008-09, teacher of color turnover increased by 28% (Ingersoll et al, 2014). For these reasons, the challenge of retention appears at least as important as—if not more important than—recruitment and hiring practices. We are concerned that the increasing percentages of students of color will continue to widen the gap in demographic parity unless

districts commit to *both* recruitment and retention of teachers of color (see Ahmad & Boser, 2014).

- ***Research on the recruitment and retention of teachers of color primarily takes place in large urban settings.***

Similarly, the majority of the research on the topic has focused on teachers of color in urban contexts (see, e.g., Bristol, 2014; Lewis, 2006). The invaluable research that has been conducted may not translate well to rural and suburban districts where people of color are fewer and "community" may be more difficult for teachers of color to find. In order to inform rural and suburban districts' strategies, we need to better understand how teachers of color experience *their* schools, districts, and communities and how those experiences influence their decisions to remain in, move within, or leave the districts. The districts have limited exit interview data and have not been disaggregating and analyzing their recruitment, hiring, and retention data by race. Intuitively, we know that being a teacher of color in Boston is qualitatively different than being a teacher of color in Iowa City, but our research-based knowledge of the latter is limited.

- ***Few studies on diversifying the teacher workforce truly center race.***

Irizarry and Donaldson (2012) noted that "the role of race/ethnicity in the recruitment, preparation, and retention of teachers has been understudied and undertheorized" (p. 160). This became apparent to us from the relatively small number of studies focused on teachers of color within the voluminous research on recruitment and retention generally.

Indeed, much of what we know about the recruitment and retention of teachers of color is based on two federally-funded, large-scale surveys: the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and its supplement, the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS). Reports based on these surveys demonstrate that race does matter in the recruitment and retention of teachers of color (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2016; Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Kissel, Meyer, & Liu, 2015; Sohn, 2009; Strunk & Robinson, 2006). For example, Ingersoll and May (2011, 2017) found the level of collective faculty decision-making influence in the school and the degree of individual instructional autonomy held by teachers in their classrooms to be the strongest factors in the retention of teachers of color. Further, unlike for White teachers, Ingersoll and May (2011, 2017) found that factors like the percentage of poverty-level students, the percentage of minority students, and location in an urban or suburban community were not strongly or consistently correlated with the turnover of teachers of color.

As Ingersoll and May (2011) acknowledge, however, the study had limitations because they chose to study only eight factors they believed to be potentially related to turnover. The factors found to be statistically significant in this study may not be the only or the most important factors in the retention of teachers of color.

Additionally, the SASS/TFS instruments are unequipped to explain *how* and *why* race matters. There is a single item on the TFS (2012 – 2013) that asks directly why a teacher left: "Indicate the level of importance EACH of the following played in your decision to <u>leave</u> the position of a K–12 teacher" (emphasis in original). The extensive list of reasons why teachers might decide to leave does not include options unique to the experiences of teachers of color. For example, microaggressions, harassment, discrimination, and institutional racism are not included in the list of options to choose from (Castaneda et al., 2006; Dingus, 2008).

Similarly, a small body of research is beginning to point to how organizational factors may be differentially experienced by teachers of color (Bristol, 2014). Questions about how their experiences are different are not answered through analyses of the SASS and TFS.

Studies that do focus on teachers of color provide evidence that centering race helps us overcome these limitations. In their cross-case analysis of three data sets, Irizarry and Donaldson (2012) found that, overall "the perspectives and experiences of Latinas/os differed from the dominant narrative about teacher recruitment, retention, and turnover in notable ways" (p. 166). While the dominant narrative holds that teachers enter the profession due to positive experiences with schooling, Latina/o teachers in their study entered teaching to combat negative experiences with schooling.

C3E's Research Response

Our literature review made it clear that, to inform district strategies, we must better understand how teachers of color experience these specific schools, districts, and communities and how that influences their decisions to remain in, move within, or leave the districts. To that end, we are in the process of conducting a qualitative study of teachers of color who are employed by the districts, as well as teachers of color who have left the three districts in the past five years.

These findings will be used to wrap up the Focus Project's Exploration & Design Phase. We expect to share the ultimate findings to help districts determine what policies and practices will need to change, what proactive programs can be implemented, and how to evaluate efforts to diversify the workforce over time.

Research Project Methodology

To undertake this original research project, we are utilizing two methods of data collection: focus groups and interviews with current teachers of color and interviews with former teachers of color (limited to teachers who left the districts within the last five years for any reason, including retirement). This report represents our preliminary findings based on focus groups with current teachers of color conducted in October 2017. We are in the process of fundraising in order to continue data collection, with an emphasis on recruiting and conducting interviews with former teachers of color.

The focus group participants were recruited through the Human Resources Department and/or Offices of Diversity and Equity at each of the respective school districts. These offices distributed the recruitment email to teachers of color in their districts with the instruction for interested teachers to contact the researchers directly via email. Prior to the date of the session, the researchers sent all interested teachers a copy of the consent script and confirmation of the time and location of the focus group. The focus groups were scheduled for wninety minutes. The first focus group took place at a community library, the second at the central district office, and the third at a private office building. Upon arrival, participants were first asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their demographics and employment history. They were then asked to complete a five-minute free-write in response to the prompt "What does it mean for you to be a teacher of color in your school, district, and community?" Thereafter, the researchers utilized a semi-structured focus group protocol and co-facilitated the sessions. The questionnaires were entered into an Excel database and analyzed for descriptive

statistics. The focus group recordings and free-writes were transcribed, and the resulting data was coded and analyzed for common themes.

The researchers have begun the process of recruiting former teachers of color for interviews. Again, we obtained contact information for former teachers of color from the Human Resources Department and/or the Offices of Diversity and Equity in each of the respective districts and are utilizing a snowball sampling method to recruit additional former teachers of color. We will utilize a semi-structured interview protocol, which will be conducted via telephone or videoconference using a secure service. Our goal is to recruit approximately 15 former teachers.

We encountered a number of methodological challenges that delayed our progress, including staff turnover in the districts, challenges identifying participants, and challenges recruiting participants. Given the challenges we experienced in recruiting participants, we requested a revision to our IRB approval to allow for individual interviews rather than only focus group interviews. While this process took some time, we secured IRB approval and are commencing with scheduling these individual interviews. We also recognize that, while our snowball method of identifying former teachers of color has taken a long time to yield interviewees. We now are starting to make contact with these subjects.

This report covers the focus groups conducted thus far across the three school districts. Nine teachers of color participated in the focus groups; seven of the nine teachers were African American and two were Latino. Six of the teachers were female and three were male. The participating teachers of color have taught in their respective school districts for between 3 - 21 years, for an average of 8.6 years. Three of the teachers taught in high schools and six taught in elementary schools. All of the teachers taught in predominantly white school settings, however, the percentages of students of color in their schools varied. Five of the participants taught in schools where students of color accounted for less than 10% of the student population and the remaining taught in schools where the percentage of students of color ranged from 30% - 40%. Six of the nine participants were born and raised in Iowa, the majority were from the communities where they now work as teachers. The remaining three participants moved to Iowa because of a family or friend connection.

Preliminary Findings

In this section, we present our preliminary findings based on the data collected from focus group discussions with nine teachers of color across three school districts in eastern Iowa. These preliminary findings highlight the intersection of race and place in the experiences of teachers of color in these Iowa school districts. Implications for the recruitment and retention of teachers of color will be drawn from these early findings to guide our ongoing research as well as district policy-making.

The majority of teachers interviewed were from Iowa, and all had lived for an extended period of time in Iowa or in a place similar to Iowa by demographics and climate. They described Iowa as home or considered it home because of strong ties to family and friends. When asked what to recommend to districts about recruiting teachers of color, one participant commented:

> You have to get out of state and get somebody who wants to … be in Iowa. Because they have to understand that it's just here. Like here is home. So we're not big city, but somebody who wants to live in Iowa and be in Iowa.

All of the participants felt proud to be teachers of color in their respective communities. The role itself held high esteem. They recounted experiences of being acknowledged by members of their respective communities. One African American female teacher shared this story:

> At my church, my pastor is always saying, "We have a teacher in our congregation." I'm like, "What? You don't have to do that." But yeah. So it makes me feel good that the community accepts us as being teachers. And I think the community is proud to say they have someone of color that's a teacher.

A Latino teacher shared a similar experience:

> I've felt a huge connection with the [Latino] families. I would hear them like, "Oh, did you see it, did you see it? He's Latino." I would hear them talk to each other, and I was like, "That is so cool."... It was a huge deal for a lot of families and some of the kids because there was that connection of me being Latino and them being Latino. … And I've felt like [the parents] felt that their kids could someday aspire to be someone, which was a great feeling.

In addition to being role models in the community, many of the participants lived in the communities where they worked. An African American female teacher shared:

> I shopped with our kids [the students in her school]. They knew where I lived. They saw me outside playing with my daughter. They saw me and I was a person to them, and so then we built relationships. … [T]hey knew me and so by the time they got to me [as a student in my classroom], we already had a relationship. They already knew, "I know your momma. I know your daddy. You know you better do your job because if you don't, you know [I live] right around the corner."

As a teacher of color who lives in the community, this participant, like others, was able to forge relationships with children before they were formally enrolled in her classroom. Children knew the participants as a neighbor or an elder before they knew them as a teacher. In many instances, the participants knew the parents of their students because they grew up in the same neighborhood and went to same high school. In some instances, participants still had a relationship with the parents and the family. For example, an African American male teacher disclosed that while many of his high school friends had since moved away, he still talked to their parents and was aware of what's happening with their grandkids, nieces, and nephews. Such longstanding relationships with people in the community enabled many participants to, "have an ear to what's going on in the neighborhood," as one participant stated. Such relationships were important to participants' sense of connection to the community.

The participating teachers of color who were born and raised in Iowa were clear in their convictions and decisions to teach in their respective school districts. One participant conveyed what we heard from all of the teachers of color with deep roots in Iowa, "Well, I grew up here, so it was an easy decision." An African American female teacher put a finer point on this "easy decision." She attended a teacher recruitment fair where she had the choice between a starting salary of $30K in an Iowa school district or $50K if she relocated to teach in another state. She chose to stay:

> But even [the potential to earn more money] wasn't a big pull for me because ... I knew that I wanted to give back to my community. I wanted to give back to our kids.

Like this participant who passed up the opportunity to make $20K more than her starting salary in Iowa, the teachers of color in this study were unwavering in their decisions to teach and stay in Iowa schools because of their dedication to their students of color. The participants who were born and raised in Iowa knew what it was like to be a student of color in Iowa public schools. They "wanted to give back" and make the schooling experiences for students of color better.

One African American male teacher from Iowa remembered what it was like to have a teacher of color as a kid:

> I had one African American teacher in 12 years [of] school. There was a couple others ones around but I only had one of them. So that means something to me. ... I'd say a lot of my students I see every day are African American so I know I'm the first one that they've seen. And most of my students are sophomores so that's-- they're almost done so that does mean something to me.

Another participant concurred by expressing, "[Being a teacher of color for students of color] definitely matters."

Participants who relocated to Iowa also had limited experiences with teachers of color when they were students in K-12 schools. One participant lamented, "I never had a black teacher until I got to college." This shared experience of having minimal to no contact with teachers of color as a student shaped the meaning and significance that the participants attached to their roles as teachers.

The participants reflected on what it means to be a teacher of color in their Iowa schools. The female participants assumed the role of "othermothers" (Hill-Collins, 2000; Irvine,1999; Morris, 2004). An African American female teacher explained, "I talk to my kids like they're mines. I'm going to treat them like they're mines." A Latina teacher illustrated this point by describing how she interacts with students of color in her school:

> I go in mommy mode—as soon as I have African American students or even Hispanic students in my classroom, I go into that mommy mode right away to where I'm more scolding them than anything else, like, "Sit down. No. Get to class. Do this." And so I'm more—my tone is different, but they get it. They get it right away because they see the consistency, they see the structure, but they also see the love that's behind it too.

In another example, an African American female teacher described acting as a mother to students of color as part of what it means to be a teacher of color:

> I tell my colleagues, like the extra stuff that I have to do, like being that mother. I am not a mother, but I have to be a mother so much at school. It's just like that's an added job description that I have because I'm black, that [white teachers] don't have. And so it's just that understanding of my job is different because I'm a teacher of color.

Similar to other participants, this teacher explained that taking on the role of "othermothers" is an added job description" that she has because she is black. Like other study participants, she understands "the extra stuff" that she has to do and that her "job is different" precisely because she is a teacher of color. Students of color often seek out teachers of color in the school building, even if the teacher of color is not their assigned teacher. Another participant explained,

As far as being a teacher of color within the building, I feel like my presence there is someone that students can talk to. There are times when I feel like I'm—I don't want to say pointed out—but I tend to be the go-to for a lot of the kids because I know most of the students that come to me, I build those relationships and those connections with them.

In addition to serving as othermothers, participants described assuming another role—that of intermediaries. This role as intermediary is nuanced, layered, and multidirectional. Teachers of color described translating white teachers' behavior to students of color as well as translating students of color's behavior to white teachers and administrators. An African American female teacher shared this account of how she stepped in as a "bridge builder" when students of color accused their white teachers of being racist:

I have some colleagues in my department who've had those issues with students. And they're at the point that "Okay, well he just out blank called me a racist in class. I had no clue what to do or what to say." And so it's the same kid that I'll pull aside and say, "Hey, what's going on?" … When I have teachers come to me for that, and then I happen to be the one to kind of connect with the student to get all the information out. And then [I] start building those bridges of communication with the student and the teacher again.

As an intermediary, this participant listened to the student of color's account and counseled him: "Well, let's come back to it again, … we just can't say she's racist because she did this differently for you compared to another kid." She also listened to the white teacher's account and counseled her: "And here's why he felt this way, and how he felt this was unfair, this was unjust...." She helped both the student of color and the white teacher to see one another's perspective, then encouraged them to "start building those bridges of communication." The teacher of color coached the student of color to "go back to the teacher and [have] a conversation with the teacher of, 'Okay, here's what's going on. Here's what's happening.'" This is a unique and important role that this participant—and other teachers of color—are well positioned to play. They help their students of color to unpack their experiences, develop their voice, and negotiate their relationships with their teachers. Teachers of color also assist their white colleagues with reflecting on their instructional practices and engagement with students of color.

In another example, an African American teacher was asked to address a group of African American boys who were cursing on the playground:

[T]hey're playing basketball, and [the student] was saying the "N" word, playing ball. And again, my lens is different than your lens. So, [where] I grew up, that's how the boys play basketball. ... I did talk to him about it and say, "Hey man, you know you can't use that word at school. I understand it's a normal part of your vocabulary, but not at school." ... I talked to the teacher and she felt like I sent the message of boys will be boys, and that he wasn't dealt with appropriately. … You want this kid punished. [Y]ou don't understand culturally that's just—he didn't mean anything by it. I still have that conversation, "Don't say it at school, man. Come on, you get it."

Choosing to use the basketball experience as a teachable moment instead of a punitive lesson, the participant reminded the students that "you know you can't use that word at school." She elected to teach the students about the importance of code-switching between different social contexts. However, the white teacher was displeased with how the teacher of color handled

the situation. The teacher of color's effort to serve as an intermediary felt less effective to her because she was unable to help the white teacher understand the situation from the African American boys' perspective.

Another role teachers of color play is advocates for their students of color. In spaces where students and families of color could not represent themselves, teachers of color were present to voice their concerns and defend their educational rights. An African American female teacher recounts a meeting about disparities in the testing scores for white students and students of color:

> We're looking at our data now. ... [O]ur students of color are maybe 60% and 30% proficient in reading and math compared to their white peers who are at 80% and 90% proficient in reading and math. So there's this huge discrepancy.... And there's not a lot of effort, which frustrates me, of, "What are we doing about this?" and a lot of excusing it away, of, "Well, you know. It's just a handful of kids," and, "Someone's got to be at the bottom," and, "Well, you know, if their behavior was better, if their parents--" all these other excuses other than, "We're not actually doing our jobs."

This teacher of color expressed frustration that the white teachers and administration at her school accepted the disparities in reading and math for students of color. She experienced her white colleagues making excuses for the significant difference in scores—"It's just a handful of kids" and "Someone's got to be on the bottom" —or attributing blame to the students' and parents' behavior. As an advocate, this teacher of color called on her white colleagues to hold themselves accountable for the scores of all students - including the students of color.

This participant used the account above to explain why she stays:

> [E]very time I say I'm going to move to another school, I feel bad because I know the kids. And then I think if I'm not there to actually have these conversations, will that conversation even be had? So it's frustrating. But then I feel obligated to stay because I do know what would happen if I wasn't there.

This participant felt a sense of responsibility to the students of color in her school. She stayed because she knew that if she, as a teacher of color, was not present to have the conversation about teacher accountability and academic disparities, the conversation would not take place. In saying "I do know what would happen if I wasn't there," she spoke about the impact of the absence of the other roles that she played as "othermother," intermediary, and advocate on both the students of color and the school.

This sense of responsibility and obligation to stay was shared by other participants in the study. An African American male teacher stated, "I know if I go to a different school either for a coaching reason or taking an administration position, then that's going to negatively impact [the students of color's] ability to have somebody that looks like them teach them." Another teacher of color explained,

> [I] feel like I would be letting my community down by leaving because I do consider myself a quality teacher and not even just quality, a dang good teacher. As probably the same as the people in this room and so, my expertise and my talent and my resources, I want to build up where I came from and I will feel like I was letting [students of color in my school] down by going somewhere else and giving my gifts and talents to kids that I don't even know which, I will still do with the same passion and the same zeal and everything but

these are my [kids.] ... I'm teaching kids who don't think they can do anything that you can do something.

Implications for Recruitment and Retention

These preliminary findings have several implications for the recruitment and retention of teachers of color.

Recruitment

Districts should ensure they recruit teachers of color who are aware of the context of both the school and community. Most of the participants in the study worked in predominantly white schools where they were the only teacher of color or one of a few teachers of color, and the percentages of students of color are between 10% - 40%. The participants who grew up in Iowa knew how to navigate these predominantly white spaces as a person of color. They had family roots and connections. For them, Iowa was home.

Districts may also wish to consider targeting candidates who are not from Iowa but are familiar with the context. Iowa became home for most of the teachers of color who relocated to the state for work. Unlike their peers who were born and raised in Iowa, these participants talked about the need to travel out of state on occasion. For example, one participant disclosed that she leaves the state once a month "to reconnect somewhere else."

The participants shared a clear and common affinity for Iowa, although several acknowledged that they may move away based on their spouse's professional aspirations.

> **Recommendations for Recruitment:** Districts should consider recruiting from these pools of potential candidates: a) teachers of color who left the state but may be willing to come back; b) college students of color who are earning their education credentials at Iowa universities; c) college students of color in out-of-state institutions who have lived in predominantly rural states and colder climates; d) paraeducators of color who are interested in becoming teachers; and e) middle and high school students of color in Iowa schools.

Retention

Preliminary findings also point to certain strategies for the retention of teachers of color. Given the roles that teachers of color play in addition to their primary responsibilities as teachers of record—as "othermothers" to students of color, intermediaries between students of color and white teachers and administrators, and as advocates for students of color—and as a signal of the value they add to the districts overall, districts should consider augmenting the compensation of teachers of color in the form of additional pay and benefits (such as tuition remission for graduate school).

Strategies to increase the retention of teachers of color should also take into consideration the racial climate of schools and district. Teachers of color should not be solely responsible for the care and advocacy for students of color. Students of color are every educator's responsibility within the school and district, and all teachers and administrators should be held accountable for the academic performance of students of color. To this end, districts may wish to consider the adoption of strategies and practices that reduce teachers' implicit bias and elevate their expectations for students of color.

Finally, leadership at the school and district levels are central to conversations about the retention of teachers of color. Just as students of color benefit from seeing teachers of color in their schools, teachers of color benefit from having administrators of color in positions of leadership at the school and the central district offices. Districts should increase the numbers of administrators of color and open more pathways to advancement for teachers of color.

> **Recommendations for Retention:** Districts should consider efforts to a) improve the racial climate in their schools; b) provide additional compensation to teachers of color for their additional responsibilities and value; and c) increase the numbers of administrators of color and open more pathways for advancement of teachers of color.

Conclusion

The Creative Corridor Center for Equity remains poised to support school districts as they endeavor to build short- and long-term strategies to diversify their workforce by race and ethnicity. We will continue to update participating districts as this research project progresses and will be pleased to help translate these findings into actions. Questions and comments can be send to Circe Stumbo, Co-Founder and Chair, C3E, 930 E. College St., Iowa City, IA 52240 or circe@westwinded.com.

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