

The Equity Ambassador Program: A Case Study of a District Excelling at Equity- Informed Action

Prepared for

Wisconsin Education Association Council

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1. Summary and Background

This report summarizes a case study of a Wisconsin local teacher union leadership team who is actively and tangibly working toward equity-focused policy changes as result of participating of the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) Equity Ambassador Program from 2021-2024. This report also summarizes two key features of the Equity Ambassador Program’s statewide, teacher-led professional development program that builds educator capacity for equity work.

The Equity Ambassador Program, funded in part by the National Education Association (NEA), WEAC, and school district Title 2 funds, is a three-year educator training program. The program leads Wisconsin educators through a three-year curriculum comprised of three levels: (1) equity-based self-awareness training, (2) the social and structural components of equity-based change, and (3) capacity-building strategies to implement changes in district or school policy through teamwork and community engagement.

The trainings ran concurrently as each cohort progressed through the three-year training sequence (2021-2024). See Table 1 for a summary of Equity Ambassador Training cohorts during the NEA grant period.

Table 1. Summary of Equity Ambassador Training Cohorts During NEA Grant Period (2021-2024)

Equity Ambassador Training Cohorts	Equity Ambassador Training Program Levels		
	Level 1: Developing the Equity Ambassador	Level 2: Building Equity Teams	Level 3: Creating Equity Team Policy Change
Cohort 1	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Cohort 2	2022-2023	2023-2024	-
Cohort 3	2023-2024	-	-

1.1 Purpose and Brief Overview of Findings

The purpose of the case study is to document a district “bright spot”. A bright spot is defined as a district who is showing promising results with the implementation of the Equity Ambassador Program strategies and practices. The district highlighted in this case study is the Green Bay Education Association.

The Green Bay Education Association’s equity-focused implementation focused on the key areas:

- Organizational level changes that include multi-level organizational involvement in the training.
- Structural changes such as governance documents revision from an equity lens.
- A collaborative union-district partnership which supports and enables equity-focused change.
- Supporting individual teachers in their mindset for equity learning and change.

Participants also noted two distinctive features of the Equity Ambassador Program training:

- Statewide, teacher-led professional learning that builds teachers’ capacities for equity in their classrooms, schools, and districts.
- Peer-to-peer, community based learning format to reduce feeling isolated and share best practices across diverse school district types (i.e., rural, suburban, and urban).

2. Evaluation Approach

WEAC worked with a program evaluation consultant, Blueprint for Education, who created surveys for each year of the training and conducted a case study analysis of a “bright spot” local union who is implementing the Equity Ambassador Program principles in their district. This case study analysis describes the equity work at one local teacher union whose leadership and members have completed three years of successive trainings in the program.

While the surveys are not part of the case study analysis or reporting, additional context about the survey is provided in this document for a complete picture of the evaluation activities during the grant period. The surveys were created by Blueprint for Education, in collaboration with WEAC project leaders and Equity Ambassador facilitators. The surveys were administered by WEAC at the end of each training for Years 1-3. The surveys focused on program and process improvement and key learning outcomes, such as how well participants met learning objectives or feel prepared to lead an equity team at their district. Survey analysis was conducted by WEAC and used for programmatic improvement and baseline outcomes reporting.

For a complete description of the key program and evaluation strategies and activities, outputs, and outcomes of the WEAC Equity Ambassador Grant Program Evaluation Logic Model, see Appendix A.

2.1 Case Study Methods

The Green Bay Education Association (GBEA) was selected by WEAC project leadership as an ideal case study based on the following criteria:

- Complete Levels 1-3 Equity Ambassador Program trainings.
- Design and implement equity-focused structural and policy changes because of participating in the Equity Ambassador Program trainings at their district.
- Expand the participation of Equity Ambassador Program trainings to their members and executive board.
- Strong support from union president and vice-president.

Two interviews with GBEA leadership were conducted in February 2024. Two interviews with WEAC Equity Ambassador facilitators (those who design and facilitate the trainings) were also conducted in February 2024 to provide additional context on the progress and reach of GBEA as well as the overall state-wide Equity Ambassador trainings and program.

The interviews focused on the following questions:

1. How has the Equity Ambassador Program shaped your thinking as an educator, leader, and/or facilitator?
2. What kinds of actions are you and/or union taking as a result of the Equity Ambassador Program?
3. What factors influence the uptake of equity strategies at the local union and/or district?
4. What makes The Equity Ambassador Program training unique as a equity-focused professional learning experiences?

The 30–45-minute individual interviews were conducted virtually by the evaluator consultant (Sara Kraemer, Blueprint for Education), audio-recorded, and transcribed. The interview transcripts were thematically coded by the evaluator consultant using NVivo[®], a qualitative analysis software.

3. Case Study: Green Bay Education Association

The Green Bay Education Association (GBEA) is a professional organization of educators and paraprofessionals working in the Green Bay Area Public School District in Green Bay, Wisconsin¹, and is a WEAC affiliate. The Green Bay Area Public School district serves more than 19,000 students, is the fourth largest public school in Wisconsin, and has 42 individual schools².

3.1 Organization and Equity-Based Changes

GBEA’s approach to the organization of equity-based change involves at least three factors:

- Multi-level organizational involvement in trainings and structural changes.
- Individual, teacher level considerations in the preparation for equity work.
- Robust district-union collaboration to support equity work and changes.

Multi-Level Organizational Involvement in Equity Ambassador Trainings

GBEA recognizes that equity-based change must occur at the organizational level as well as the individual level. For example, GBEA leadership has centered equity in their work and everything they do, as evidenced by participating in the Equity Ambassador Program training as well as ongoing equity work at the district. Because their organizational values center of disseminating the knowledge of the trainings throughout the organization, they have extended the reach of Equity Ambassador trainings to other members as well as their executive board. The GBEA President describes the executive board involvement:

“I wrote a grant for last summer to be able to provide the Level 1 training to our entire executive board. And I've done Level 1, I think three times, but I wanted to be in on it with the executive board, because that's a development among the community of the board. The goal was to get everyone on the board trained in Level 1 and we wanted to move them and progress them through which now in March [2024] that most of us will be in Level 3 together. So, we had the core executive board team.”

GBEA continues to emphasize and encourage that their members, building representatives, and board members who had not yet participated in trainings, to participate in the Levels 1-3 trainings. The GBEA President goes on to explain:

¹ Green Bay Education Association website (<https://weac.org/region/gbea/>) accessed on March 13, 2024.

² Green Bay Area Public Schools website (https://www.gbaps.org/why_choose_gbaps), accessed on March 18, 2024.

“The goal is to continue to scaffold it and we started with the executive board. And now so they've moved up to Level 3, a lot of building reps over time have moved up and moved through, and they're at Level 2. We've really been pushing the Level 1 training, and we've got [GBEA board members and educators in] Levels 1, 2, and 3, in March [2024].”

The GBEA Vice President described how they communicate the importance of participating in the Equity Ambassador Programs to their members:

“We're also bringing Equity Ambassadors to Green Bay in March [2024]. So, we'll have all levels here, because we're pushing it to them and we're saying, hey, this is important. We teach a very diverse group of students here, make sure that you're taking part in this. People are taking it with us and they're running with us on this.”

Structural Changes: Governance Documents and Opportunity Audit

As part of the Equity Ambassador Level 1 training, GBEA completed an Opportunity Audit, an organizational assessment developed by the NEA to improve equitable conditions in schools. As a result, the GBEA has begun the work of reviewing their constitution and by-laws to ensure they are inclusive, equitable, and meet the diverse needs of members and students. The GBEA President explains:

“Everything that we're doing is all for the betterment of the organization, and to meet everyone. In the Equity Ambassadors [Program], we talked a lot about structures that are in place, and how the structures either really, really set you up for success or don't. And I think it kind of came off in those conversations looking at like, okay, do these policies set up someone better, easier, more able to get into a position of power than someone else? I think it evolved from that. And we're like, we should really look at these and make sure they're equitable.”

The GBEA Vice President described how revising the GBEA documents ensures that chairs and committees participate in equity work because it is structurally codified in their governance documents:

“We've started to look at our constitution and by-laws to make sure they're more representative. They're more inclusive. But we understand that the equity work is never going to be done, right? It's not going to ever be done completely, but we can always strive towards it. The hope is that when we have it here [the governance documents] that even our chairs and our committees will be able to take part in it.”

District-Union Collaboration

GBEA leadership called out the strong collaboration that exists between GBEA and Green Bay Area Public School District administration, as well as the district's own ongoing commitment to equity, as a key feature that has supported GBEA to progress with their equity work. The GBEA union leadership reflected on the importance of having strong collaborative ties between local teacher unions and their districts in equity-based work:

“I think it definitely plays a role. I think our district also understands that equity has to be at the forefront. In a district as large as ours, it's not always easy to get that moving. [...] So, I definitely think that our district believes that we should be making decisions with equity in mind. Our President and our Executive Director really worked hard with our district to be able to have these conversations. Our district never sits there and goes “we're not talking about equity”. [...] So, it's really nice. And I also think part of that comes from all the years that our union has been able to build that relationship and build that trust. And so now we're able to kind of just take that trust and run with it. I think if we were in a position where we had to still build the trust and our district didn't trust us like, it would be very hard to have these conversations, but we're lucky to be in a district where we have that.”

When asked for examples that exemplify their union-district collaborative relationship, GBEA President described the following:

“I meet with our Associate Superintendent every other week. Our Executive Director meets with her weekly, we both met with the superintendent last week. And then we meet with the district cabinet weekly to talk about any issues that we need to take care of. So, there's a very open communication. And when there are issues, we're able to connect with them and get answers before [things are] lost in translation, or where there is miscommunication.”

3.2 Teacher-Level Considerations in Equity Work

The Equity Ambassador Program facilitators and GBEA leadership discussed the role of the internal qualities of teachers, particularly self-awareness and mindset, as some of the essential elements for equity success. In the Equity Ambassador Program, particularly in the Level 1 training, teachers focus on themselves through self-inquiry, but then extend out to other stakeholder groups who become partners in the work (i.e., “co-conspirators” – a term the Equity Ambassador Program training uses to describe those who take actionable and tangible steps to support equity-based changes along with teachers). This sub-section focuses on the what interviewees deemed as most important for teacher-led equity work.

The Role of Self-Awareness

The role of self-awareness is one of the first and essential steps toward equity-based change in schools. One Equity Ambassador facilitator described Wisconsin teachers’ growing awareness of the necessary shift in their teaching practice:

“It’s shifting into teachers now coming in and saying: I need to do more equity work. I definitely need to reflect on myself. And I also need to be more aware of the diverse learners in my classroom whether it be race or whether it be ability. [...] I need to learn. I had to gain more knowledge to be confident enough to continue to defend all the things that I'm teaching.”

GBEA leadership also commented on their own growing their own self-awareness and privilege through the Equity Ambassador Program by asking themselves reflective questions about their experiences and identities through the training process:

“So that [self] awareness has just kind of grown through this program. But I've always had a little bit of awareness, but the program has definitely helped. I see my privilege, obviously, that's a big piece that we talked about in Level 1 and identifying that privilege. [...] But that was kind of the really the start of my inquiry: What is white privilege? What does that mean? How did I grow up? And how did I exist? And how has that helped me even though I was from a single parent household and first generation college graduate - those types of things where I definitely had the privilege, but I also saw some of the challenges.”

The Role of Mindset

When asked what enables success in the Equity Ambassador Program, an Equity Ambassador facilitator as well as the GBEA leadership acknowledged the critical role of mindset. There are at least two important dimensions of mindset that emerged in the interviews. First was a mindset of flexibility and the second was a mindset of life-long learning.

An Equity Ambassador facilitator describes the role of a flexible mindset in their own words:

“I think there's a couple of things that are commonalities with people who have really flourished in the work of this program. I think the first one is a mindset of flexibility. At the end of Level 1, we asked participants to put together a very simplistic step, one building block of a plan. We ask them to do five W's: Where can you start? Who can you connect with? When will you start? What do you need? I think, basic, and we kind of send them on their way. And for some of our participants, it's months or even longer before we can reconnect with them for a variety of reasons. But for people who are flexible enough to adapt that very basic framework of a plan, we generally find that they're more successful. I can say that was my own experience. I left my first initial training, thinking I was going to do one thing, but I made myself the accept the fact that I was going to have to be flexible in that my original plan might not be possible. And so that allowed me to be more successful than others, I would argue, and so I think that's number one.”

Another crucial component is a lifelong learner mindset. Individuals with a lifelong learning mindset continue to pursue knowledge and master skills, both formally and informally, into adulthood and careers. GBEA leadership described the essential role of the lifelong learning mindset in the context of the learning equity-based practices and strategies:

“I think so many teachers are truly lifelong learners - they want to learn more. And I think it has also helped to bond our [executive] board because you discuss those difficult questions.”

4. Unique Features of the WEAC Equity Ambassador Program

The WEAC Equity Ambassador Program hold at least two distinctions that differentiate the trainings from other types of equity-focused professional learning experiences. The Equity Ambassador facilitators discussed the factors that build local, teacher-led capacity for equity work through a statewide training program. The factors included:

- Statewide, teacher union-led professional learning designed and facilitated by teachers, for teachers – which ensures that educational content is specific, contextually relevant, and timely to teachers’ current experiences and challenges in the Wisconsin classroom.
- Brings together teachers from districts across the state to have peer-to-peer conversations and build individual and collective capacity.

4.1 Statewide, Teacher Union-Led Professional Learning

When asked what makes a statewide teacher union-led professional learning experience about equity distinctive from other types of equity trainings, one Equity Ambassador facilitator said,

“I think this is the most important work that our union is currently doing.”

One of the key reasons is because the Equity Ambassador Program is a Wisconsin-based professional learning opportunity for educators to build their capacities to incorporate equity into classrooms and schools by connecting educators across the state. An Equity Ambassador facilitator explained:

“I think it's important because we have a largely white teaching force in the state of Wisconsin. And so, I think it's beneficial when we can get educators and members from smaller districts who don't see a lot of diversity in the teaching. They are forced to interact with colleagues who are facing different equity challenges, not just for their students, but for themselves as well. We know that equity doesn't just affect students. It affects our members as well. Experiencing different real-life stories and hearing directly from people who are dealing with them and combating them, I think, is really valuable as well.”

They go on to say:

“But, they also see that our members aren't alone either, there are districts who are doing amazing things all across the state to uplift our students of color and our LGBTQ students [for example]. We can uplift those stories in a positive way. It doesn't have to be all, you know, doom and gloom and we can never make this work where I am. So, I think that's been the most powerful thing for me, in terms of the diversity of the groups we bring together.”

Another distinctive feature of the program and a source of positive feedback from participants is the diversity of the Equity Ambassador facilitators. The facilitators bring a wealth of expertise across disciplines, professional experiences, and identities. One Equity Ambassador facilitator explained:

“Some of the positive feedback we've gotten from people who've taken the training is they are so glad that there's a diverse group of people leading and this is not all white teachers talking about race. [...] And we come in and we integrate a lot of our experiences, into little pieces and pockets of storytelling when we can, throughout our lessons, and just for people to hear that and make those connections. I think that's another piece that's empowering for people to hear. [...] And so people are hearing it and they're making connections [...].”

In addition to a diverse Equity Ambassador facilitator team, the teacher-led training sessions allow the educational content to be grounded in the realities and context of day-to-day teaching in Wisconsin. Another Equity Ambassador facilitator elaborated:

“I've been blessed to experience a lot of great professional learning, but the running joke in education circles is that oftentimes our professional learning is developed and presented by people who have not been in a classroom in a while. And so, I think one of the really wonderful things about our program is we bring facilitators together from all around the state.”

They go on to say:

“We present on a weekend. And then on Monday, we're back in our classrooms teaching and hopefully walking the walk of what we talked about all weekend long. I think that allows our program and our curriculum to not be static, we are constantly revising it. We are constantly updating it because we're on the frontlines every single day - those of us who are facilitating, we know how things are shifting.”

4.2 Peer-to-Peer Learning, Community-Based Format

Often times, educators feel isolated and alone in equity-based work, which presents a barrier to change at the classroom and school levels. WEAC specifically designed the Equity Ambassador training to be an experiential, peer-to-peer learning experience that grounds participants in a community of learners and support through mentoring conversations with facilitators. One facilitator described the experience of a teacher who felt isolated, but went on to create community-based change at their school with the help of the Equity Ambassador Program:

“She was isolated before the training, and she got connected to a community of people who had a curriculum, a structure, and a set of strategies that she could leverage - and then build her community in such a way that she didn't have to shoulder it all herself. We are building a coalition; you have to learn those skills. It [the Equity Ambassador Program] has so many different elements of self-work, self-knowledge, and reflection - but then it also has strategy.”

5. Conclusion

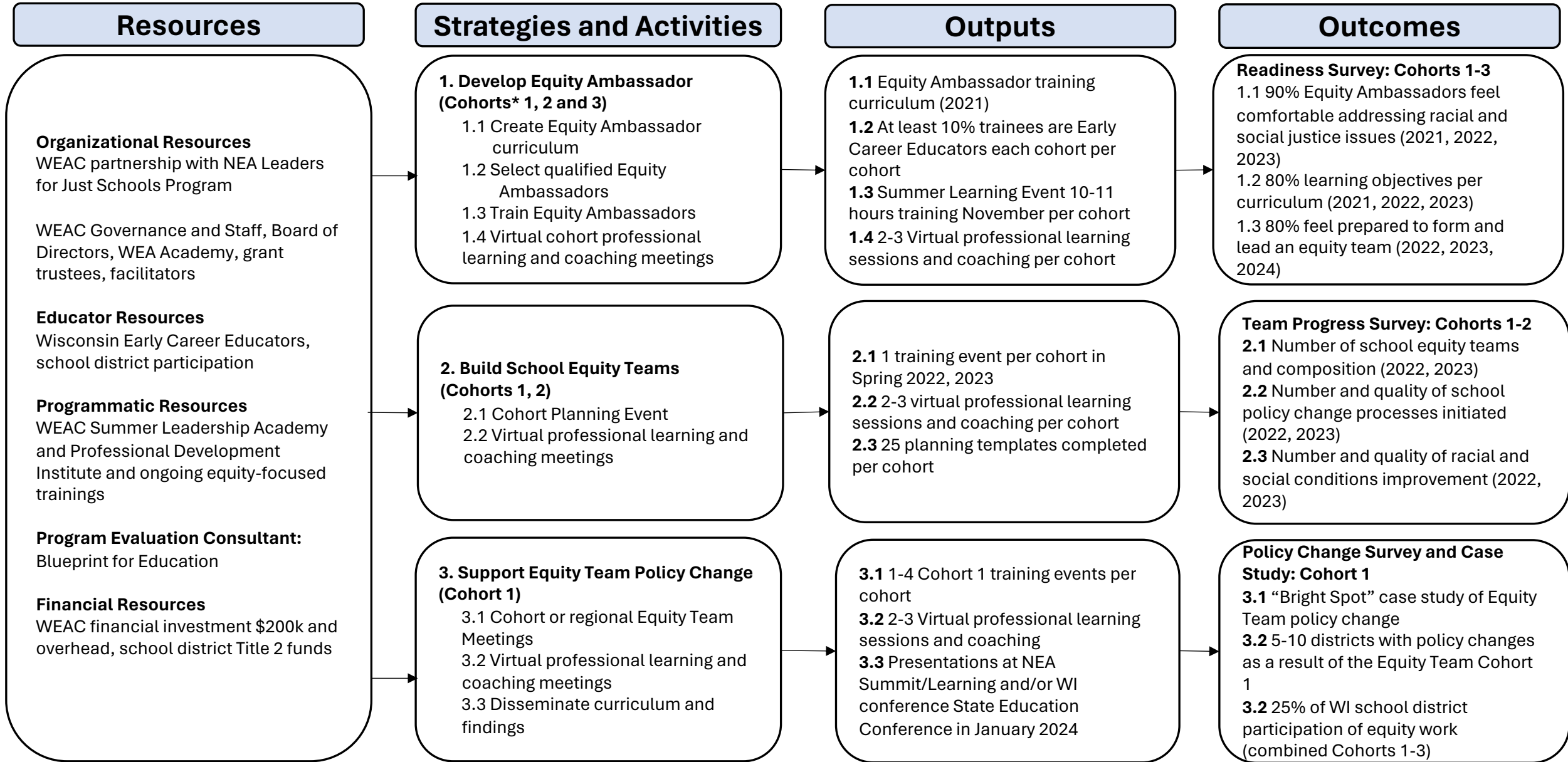
WEAC's Equity Ambassador Program training is a Wisconsin-based, statewide approach to build teachers' capacities to lead systems-level equity change in their schools and districts. The program brings together teachers from rural, suburban, and urban districts to learn, reflect, and plan together. This makes the professional learning experience distinct from other professional learning opportunities that are district-specific.

Further, the WEAC Equity Ambassador program is teacher-led, in that it is designed and facilitated by practicing teachers. This ensures that the program's curriculum is contextually relevant to diverse teachers while situating the experience in a peer-to-peer learning format. This combination builds the capacity of a statewide teacher network to create and implement equity-based strategies alongside fellow teachers.

The Green Bay Education Association is one example of a local union who has participated in Levels 1-3 trainings and are actively implementing equity-informed structural changes in their district. The GBEA invests in building and maintaining a district-union collaborative relationship, which has supported them in broadening the reach of the program to their executive board, building representatives, and members. They are further strengthening structural change by revising their governance documents from an equity perspective.

As WEAC's Equity Ambassador Program continues to grow and train more teachers, more documented case studies, best practices, and teacher reflections are needed. The GBEA is urban district and an example of a "bright spot" in the Equity Ambassador Program. Future evaluation activities might include case studies of suburban and rural districts that have different factors and contexts that shape the implementation and spread of equity-informed practices. Documenting how different types of districts and teachers approach equity based structural reform can support the quality of the Equity Ambassador Program training and remain responsive to the needs of all districts in Wisconsin.

Appendix A. WEAC Equity Ambassador Grant Program Evaluation Logic Model



*Equity Ambassador Cohort 1: 2021-2022; Cohort 2: 2022-2023; Cohort 3: 2023-2024