Developing Leaders in Employment & Eligibility: A New Path to Build from Within

A Case Study of the Sonoma ELT 2.0 program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Solano County is experiencing a concerning lack of interest in supervisor and leadership positions from the eligibility staff within the division. The leadership team in Solano County Employment & Eligibility (E&E) needed to address difficulties in developing leadership from within, specifically with the recruitment of Eligibility Benefits Specialist Supervisors (EBSS). To begin addressing this concern, the leadership team took several actions, including: initiating a Leadership Development Survey, speaking with the current supervisors and lead workers about the lack of interest at multiple division-wide leadership meetings, and conducting initial planning sessions to develop a plan to better engage staff and encourage interest in leadership roles. During this time, the hiring manager for the division entered the BASSC EDP program and learned about the Sonoma County Emerging Leaders Track 2.0 program (ELT 2.0).

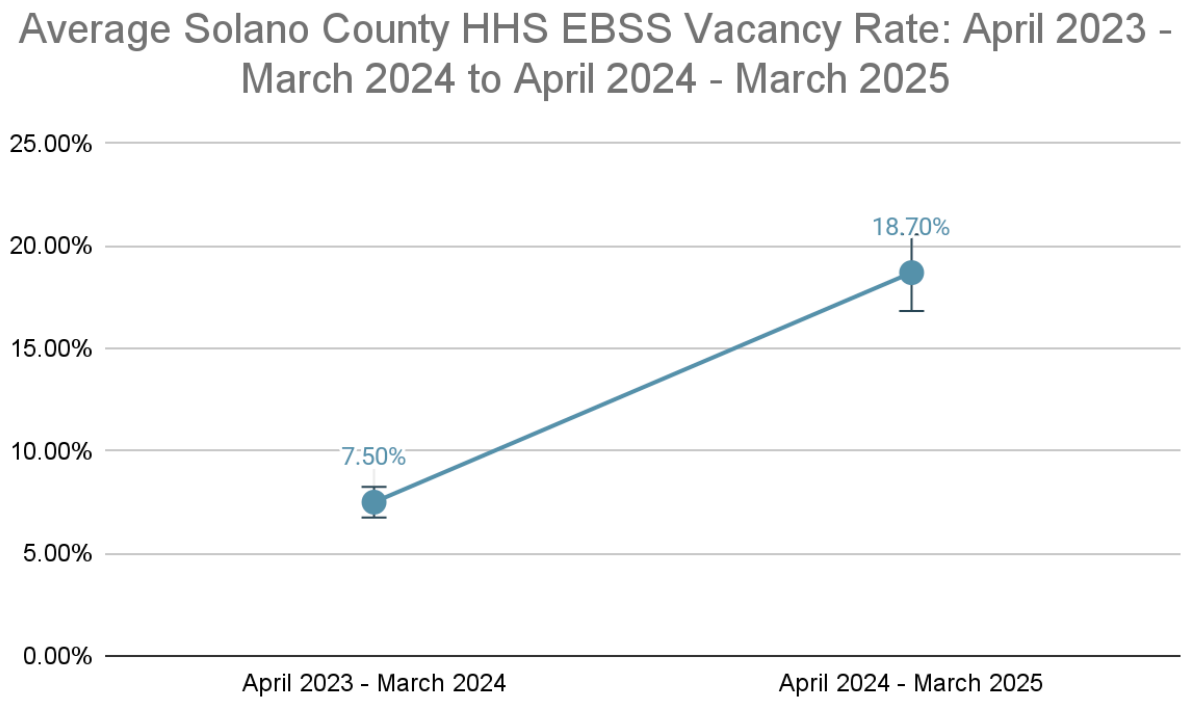
ELT 2.0 is a leadership development program that Sonoma has been administering for over 10 years with great success in developing potential leaders within their internal staff. Adjustments have been made to the program to create the current iteration, which has been exceptionally successful in promoting the development of leadership. The hiring manager from Solano County E&E has studied this program and believes Solano County would greatly benefit from a similar program. The hiring manager proposes that Solano initiate a two-track program similar to ELT 2.0 that would be smaller in scale, shorter in duration, focused specifically on EBSSs and aspiring EBSSs, and administered and facilitated by E&E Leadership.

Introduction: A Concerning Trend

On November 4, 2024, the Solano County Employment & Eligibility (E&E) hiring manager got the harsh news from E&E's Human Resource analyst: The list was exhausted. There was no list of applicant names to pull from, no names to certify and call for an interview. There were no remaining applicants for the Eligibility Benefits Specialist Supervisor (EBSS) position.

This news really hit home with the E&E hiring manager. At that moment, Solano County had five vacant positions out of the 20 total EBSS positions, and one more new EBSS position that the leadership team would be looking to open for recruitment. E&E needed supervisors, and the division was getting minimal interest from our internal staff.

When the E&E hiring manager reported this to the leadership team the next day, it really hit home with them as well. A simple conclusion was made from the lack of available applicants for our largest supervisor classification: leadership development had not been prioritized in E&E, manifesting in a void of leaders within internal staff. This lack of interest in the EBSS position appeared to the leadership team to be a recent phenomenon. Filling the eligibility supervisor position in E&E had not been this difficult in the past. The E&E hiring manager wanted to know the magnitude of the problem, so they looked into the division's vacancy rate for the last year compared to the vacancy rate of the previous year (Solano County HHS, n.d.).



The vacancy rate increase confirmed the appearance of declining interest in the position and the difficulty that E&E was having in filling the positions promptly.

The E&E leadership team had several ideas about why they saw such a low number of applicants for the EBSS position. Some of these ideas included: workers witnessing the stress that supervisors were under; supervisors not having time to develop their staff; generational attitudes towards promoting and leadership; and a relatively low pay increase between worker and supervisor. While these hypotheses may have some validity, there was no data or analysis to prove that these were the true reasons for the decline.

E&E Taking Action

On November 18, 2024 the E&E leadership team decided to initiate three actions to address the lack of interest in the eligibility supervisor position: 1) conduct a Leadership Development Survey to try to obtain data regarding the decline in applications for the EBSS position; 2) discuss and work with current supervisors and lead workers to identify and encourage staff who they knew had potential or an interest in supervision; and 3) initiate planning to create a leadership development program within E&E to engage and encourage staff who showed interest or potential for leadership.

Leadership Development Survey

On January 9, 2025, a Leadership Development Survey was sent out to 369 currently filled FTEs in E&E. The survey questions were brought to and approved by the E&E leadership team before sending the survey. The goal of the survey was to determine if staff were interested in career advancement, what positions they were interested in, reasons for lack of interest, and whether E&E leadership was doing enough to support them in reaching these goals.

85 recipients responded to the Leadership Development survey (see Appendix 1). The results of the survey provided several insights to the E&E Leadership Team:

- The majority of respondents were interested in pursuing a leadership position.
- The major reasons for not pursuing a leadership position are centered around workload, stress, and staffing shortages.
- There was interest in the supervisor position from a high percentage of respondents.
- The majority of respondents did not feel they were given the support and resources they needed to achieve their leadership goals.

The survey results confirmed suspicions that the E&E Leadership team had regarding the lack of interest in the eligibility supervisor position. The survey confirmed that there was much work to do in improving leadership development in E&E.

Working with Current Supervisors

On November 7, 2024, the E&E Managers hosted the quarterly Division Coordination Meeting, which included all supervisors and managers in E&E. The first agenda item was Leadership Development. The managers led a lengthy discussion in this meeting regarding the lack of interest from internal staff in the EBSS position. The supervisors provided their input on why

that might be the case and what we could do to address the concern. In the end, it was agreed that managers and supervisors need to prioritize encouraging and developing staff who showed potential for or interest in leadership positions. The group also agreed there was a need for an E&E-specific leadership development program.

Also on November 7, 2024, the facilitators of the Division's Lead Worker Coordination meeting discussed Leadership Development. Again, an engaging conversation was had about ways to increase internal staff's interest in leadership. This group also concluded that there was a need for a Leadership Development program that would assist with E&E-specific career growth.

Begin developing a Leadership Development program within E&E

In early December 2024, a group of E&E Managers and Administrators met to outline ideas for developing an internal E&E Leadership Development program for supervisors and those interested in supervision. During this meeting, the concept of having two programs, one for current supervisors and one for those interested in supervision, was discussed and agreed upon. An initial plan and structure for a new program were also discussed, but not finalized.

BASSC and Sonoma County Emerging Leaders Track 2.0

It was shortly after the planning meeting above that the hiring manager was given the opportunity to participate in the BASSC Executive Development Program. It was agreed that Solano would explore Sonoma County's Emerging Leaders Track 2.0 program prior to implementing any new program in Solano County.

Learning about Sonoma ELT 2.0

Background

The Emerging Leaders Track program was originally initiated in Sonoma County in 2013. The original version of the program was a 4-year program, which was later reformed into a 2-year program. Both iterations were successful in developing engagement and skills amongst Sonoma County's current and aspiring leaders. The program objectives implemented in 2013 are still relevant in the current version of the ELT 2.0 program. These program objectives are as follows: continuous improvement, employee commitment and engagement, improving current performance, building relationships, and developing leadership at all levels.

In 2022, an updated version of Sonoma County's ELT was developed, and the Emerging Leaders Track 2.0 was born. The updated program provided a new framework for participants to grow their leadership and professional skills. While including the program objectives from the previous version of ELT, ELT 2.0 added new program objectives. These new program objectives included: identify and promote leadership skills and knowledge that will benefit ELT participants and HSD, now and in the future; develop leaders that are forward thinking, capable, and self-aware; facilitate a shared vision and common language for leaders by promoting practices, behavior, and values of an HSD leader; and create an environment where participants become deeply engaged in working for HSD.

When selecting a project that could benefit Solano County E&E's current lack of interest in leadership positions, these objectives were directly aligned with what Solano's leadership believed was needed to improve the leadership development.

Structure of ELT 2.0

The application and selection process for ELT 2.0 starts with submitting an ELT 2.0 Interest form. Staff interested in participating must be a full-time employee with the department and not on probation. Supervisor or management approval is not required upon application; however, they are included in the selection process. Division Directors review, and each division's leadership makes the final decision on who is selected to participate.

ELT 2.0 includes two tracks: Track One for Core Staff(those in a non-supervisory, individual contributor role) and Track Two for Supervisory and Management Staff. Sonoma determines the number of slots available for participation in ELT 2.0 by determining the percentage of the workforce for each division. Each division is allotted a specific number of slots based on its percentage of the workforce.

The two main components of ELT 2.0 are the Leadership Trainings and the Project and Presentation. Sonoma's Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has developed a set of leadership competencies that will guide and provide structure to the teachings and projects within the ELT 2.0 program. Both components are designed to align with and develop these core competencies.

The Leadership Trainings consist of presentations made by a combination of internal and external presenters that are designed to be engaging, challenging, and relevant to reinforcing the OPM leadership competencies. Most of the ELT 2.0 trainings are 3 hours, which allows time for participants to do other activities that encourage networking, collaboration, and conversations that build a deeper understanding of training topics. Both Tracks included 12 training courses over the year for the 2024-25 program, as well as career development activities throughout the program.

For the Project and Presentation component, ELT 2.0 participants are assigned a project in a group format and work on developing it throughout the program. The topics assigned will include "real-world" challenges, issues, or concepts that can be researched to build analytical and problem-solving skills. Groups consist of 4-5 individuals who are required to develop a Project Action Plan, a Project Charter, and a Presentation that will be given to an audience of managers and directors from within the department.

There are also Career Development activities sprinkled throughout each Track in the ELT 2.0 program. These activities include a DISC assessment test, effective interviewing practices, and delivering effective presentations. The goal of the activities is to increase participants' success in promoting to leadership positions.

The two-track structure, along with the Leadership Training, Project and Presentation, and Career Development Activities, makes an exciting and robust leadership development program

that greatly benefits participants in the development of their leadership skills and the OPM leadership competencies targeted by the program.

Sonoma ELT 2.0 Success

The ELT 2.0 program has been highly successful in providing effective skills development for participants and developing staff who are successful in being promoted to leadership positions.

Impact on Participants

Staff who participated in the ELT 2.0 program starting in Spring 2024 were surveyed to identify if the program had been effective in developing different leadership competencies. The results of the survey were highly positive in that regard.

At least 95% of the participants responded 'Yes, a lot' or 'Yes, a little' to each of the questions regarding whether ELT 2.0 had assisted them in meeting the program objectives (see Appendix 2).

Promotion Outcomes

Another measure of the success of the ELT 2.0 program is the level of success participants have in being promoted to leadership positions during or after the program. Analysis of staff promotions for the department in general showed that ELT program participants in the 2022-23 cohorts were promoted at a rate more than double that of Sonoma Human Services Department staff in general (see Appendix 3).

The data clearly demonstrates the program's strong success in achieving its goals. The majority of participants in the ELT 2.0 program enjoy the experience, gain valuable skills and competencies, and have success in moving to leadership roles. This success has inspired the following proposal for a leadership development program similar to ELT 2.0 within the Solano E&E division.

Proposal: Develop an ELT 2.0-like Program to Fit Solano County E&E

To address the lack of interest and applications for the EBSS position in the Solano County E&E division, a new take on leadership development is needed. A program that engages staff with an interest and potential in leadership would greatly benefit Solano E&E by cultivating internal talent into strong leaders ready to take on greater responsibilities and support the division in effectively serving our community. A program that develops leaders successfully, like Sonoma County's Emerging Leaders Track 2.0, is needed in Solano E&E, and the program outlined in the following proposal would be a significant step in that direction.

Proposal

The proposed Leadership Development program in Solano E&E incorporates a similar application and selection process as ELT 2.0, where supervisor or management consent is not required for application. However, the supervisors and division leadership will make the final decision in selecting participants.

The new leadership development program would have two tracks similar to ELT 2.0. The 2 tracks would include Track 1 - Aspiring Supervisors, and Track 2 – Current Supervisors.

- Track 1 would focus on developing leadership skills amongst line staff who have shown potential. The track would demonstrate the differences between being a good worker, a good lead worker, and a good supervisor. Skills such as conflict resolution, expectation setting, relationship building, and more will be highlighted in the sessions within this track.
- Track 2 would focus on improving and strengthening the leadership skills within our current Supervisory team. The track would focus on the strengths of the current supervisors and build skill sets to successfully develop into future leaders. Skills strengthened would include coaching, providing effective feedback, facilitation, and other skills that enable leaders to develop leaders.

The Solano E&E leadership development program does not currently have a budget for hiring training resources or external presenters for the different track sessions. This program would rely heavily on the current leadership team to develop training modules and present to participants in areas that they feel are strengths in their own leadership. This concept has already been discussed and conceptually agreed to by many of the current E&E leadership team members. When fully staffed, there are ten members of the Leadership Team; each manager or leadership team member would present on one topic for each track. The schedule and timeframes for presentations would be decided during program development, with the goal of presenting 10 topics over a 6-month program course.

This leadership development program would not include the Project and Presentation component as modeled by Sonoma ELT 2.0. While the Project and Presentation component was highly successful and positive for the participants in ELT 2.0, the facilitation and management of the projects would require a committed member of the leadership team to create and manage the program, which is not viable for the division at this time. This new Solano E&E program would focus on interactive activities within the sessions and incorporate individual presentations into the skill-building workshops.

Just as ELT 2.0 threads its OPM Leadership Competencies into each of the sessions and tracks, the new Solano E&E program would incorporate Solano County Health & Social Services Department Leadership Principles into each of the skill-building sessions within each track. These principles would provide vision and guidance to the structure of each track and session.

Finally, the new leadership development program in E&E would also provide Career Development activities, similar to ELT 2.0, that will strengthen and grow the participant's skillset in becoming successful in promoting to leadership positions. These activities would include strength-building activities, presentations from HR, and interviewing techniques along with other activities to enrich their potential for promotion.

Understanding the ELT 2.0 program will provide Solano E&E leadership with a fresh perspective on leadership development. The impact that the program has had on Sonoma HSD staff

confirms the need to implement something similar in Solano County E&E, and the proposed new leadership development program in Solano E&E will accomplish that.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jennifer Hayworth, my host from Sonoma County, for being so generous with her time and her knowledge about the Sonoma ELT 2.0 program. Traveling to Sonoma to see the ELT 2.0 program presentations was a great experience and cemented in my mind the success and impact of the ELT 2.0 program. I would also like to thank Morgan Suazo for her assistance and insight, as well as Angela Struckmann, for her support of BASSC EDP and for allowing Sonoma to be a great host to many program participants. I'd also like to thank the Solano County BASSC Liaison, Desiree Bodiford, for her guidance and perspective. Thank you to Kelley Curtis, Deputy Director of the Solano County Employment & Eligibility Division, for supporting me and giving me the opportunity to participate in BASSC EDP. Finally, I'd like to thank Andrea DuBrow for providing support and guidance, all while managing and facilitating the BASSC EDP program, which has been an excellent experience.

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Richard Plunk. 2025. “2025 Leadership Development Survey Results.” Solano County Employment and Eligibility Services, Health and Social Services.

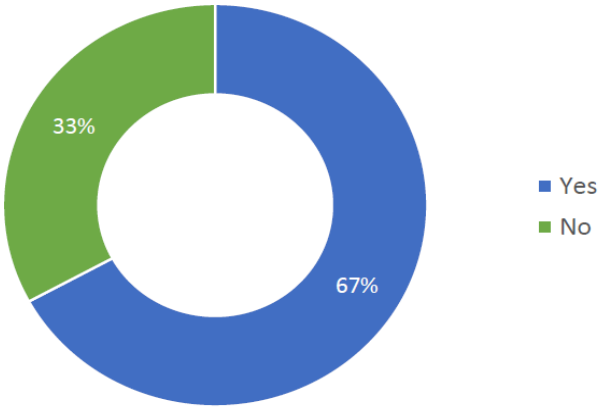
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Appendix 1: Leadership Development Survey Results

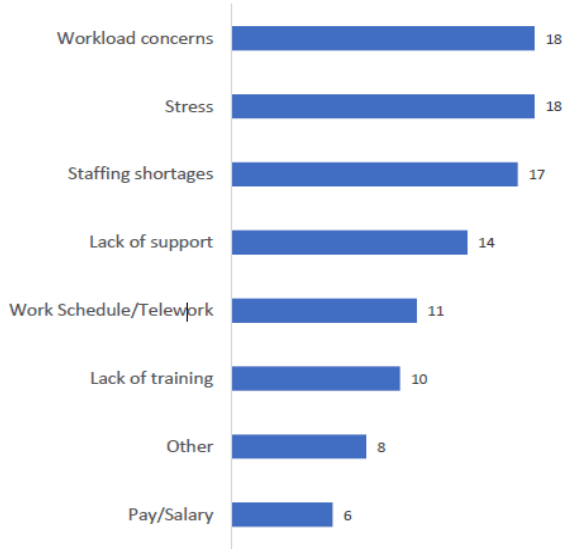
2025
Leadership Development Survey Results

Question 1: Are you interested in exploring leadership roles within the Employment & Eligibility Services Division?	Answer	Percent
Yes	57	67%
No	28	33%
Overall	85	100%



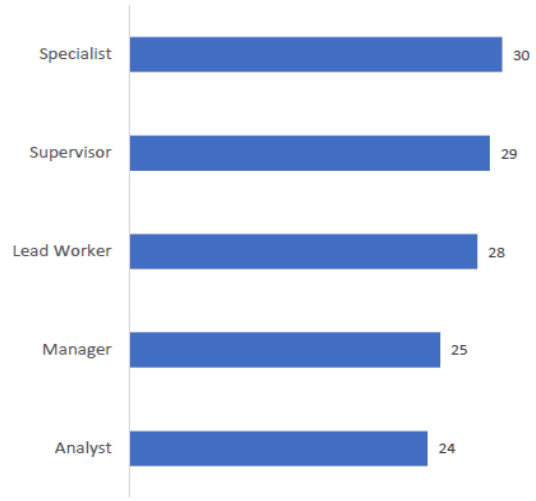
2025
Leadership Development Survey Results

Question 2: If you are not interested, please indicate the reason(s) why you are not interested. (multi-select)	Answer	Percent
Workload concerns	18	18%
Stress	18	18%
Staffing shortages	17	17%
Lack of support	14	14%
Work Schedule/Telework	11	11%
Lack of training	10	10%
Other	8	8%
Pay/Salary	6	6%
Overall	102	100%



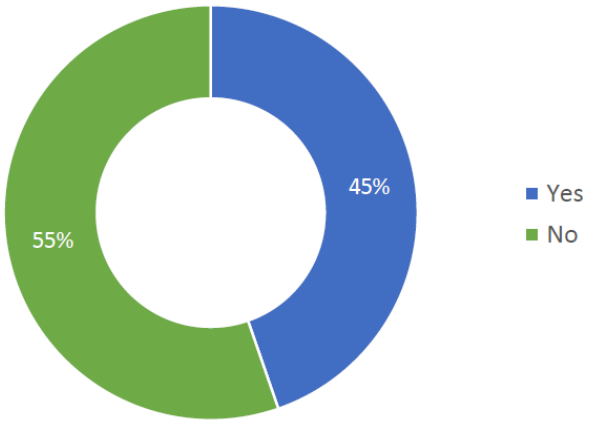
2025
Leadership Development Survey Results

Question 3: If you are interested in leadership roles, what specific areas of leadership are you interested in? (multi-select)	Answer	Percent
Specialist	30	22%
Supervisor	29	21%
Lead Worker	28	21%
Manager	25	18%
Analyst	24	18%
Overall	**136**	**100%**



2025
Leadership Development Survey Results

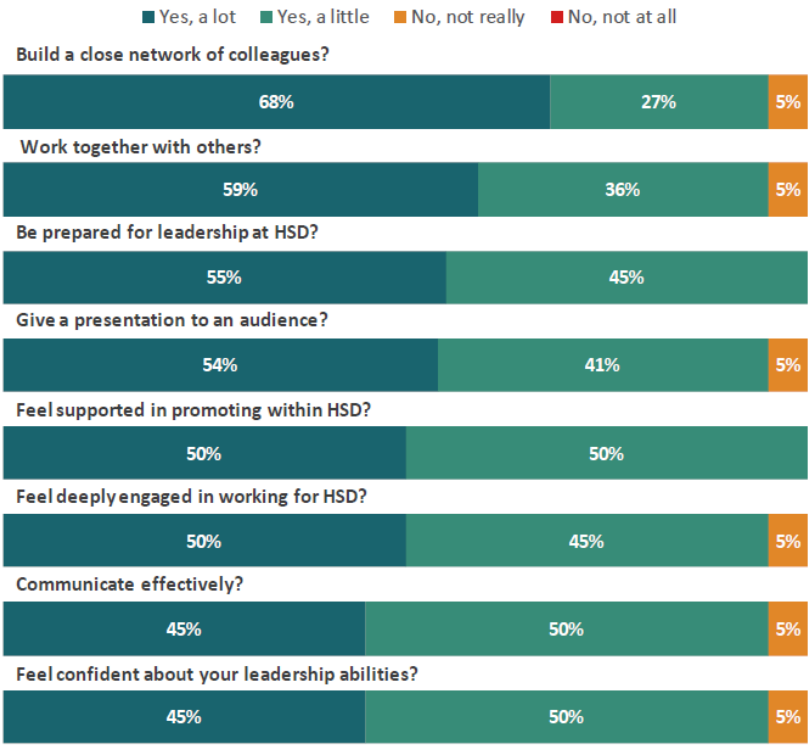
Question 4: Do you feel that you have the support and resources you need to achieve your career goals?	Answer	Percent
Yes	38	45%
No	47	55%
Overall	**85**	**100%**



Appendix 2: Results of Leadership Objectives of ELT 2.0

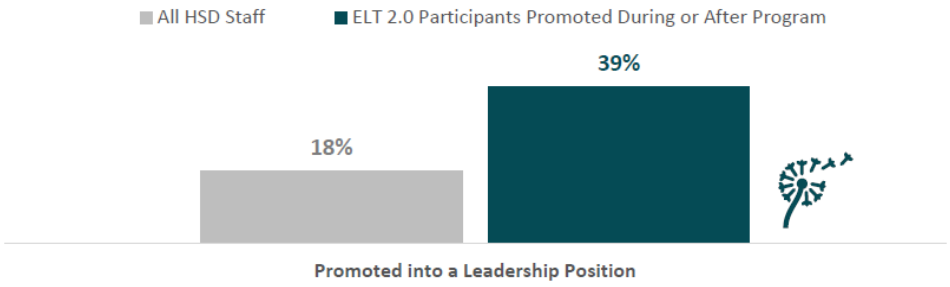
Skills & Impact of ELT 2.0

When ELT 2.0 participants were asked "Has ELT helped you to..." 100% responded *Yes, a little* or *Yes, a lot* for "Be prepared for leadership at HSD" and "Feel supported in promoting within HSD." Around 95% of participants responded either *Yes, a little* or *Yes, a lot* for the remaining statements.



Source: ELT 2.0 Mid-Program Survey 2024-25 (n = 22)

Appendix 3: Comparison of Promotion Among ELT Participants VS. All Staff



Data Source: HSD Human Resources ad hoc reports