



Redesigning High Schools

10 Features for Success

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Acknowledgments

The authors thank the many educators who have worked with passion and purpose to create new designs for high schools that can support all of their students well—often against the odds and with little support. The work of some of these educators is memorialized in the vignettes represented in this volume. Thousands of others have done similar work across the country. Special recognition goes to leaders like Ann Cook, Deborah Meier, and Ted Sizer, who have created new models for schooling and mentored the leaders who developed many others.

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Introduction: From Factory Model to Empowering Schools

“Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental. ... The freedom to learn ... has been bought by bitter sacrifice. And whatever we may think of the curtailment of other civil rights, we should fight to the last ditch to keep open the right to learn, the right to have examined in our schools not only what we believe but what we do not believe; not only what our leaders say, but what the leaders of other groups and nations, and the leaders of other centuries have said. We must insist upon this to give our children the fairness of a start which will equip them with such an array of facts and such an attitude toward truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is, and what its greater minds have thought it might be.”

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Freedom to Learn* (1949)¹

In 1949, W. E. B. Du Bois said, “Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental.” He went on to describe a vision of equitable, democratic schools focused on deeper learning for all students. Although our commitment to develop a more perfect union aspires to enact a right to learn for all children, our society has constructed a system that is still largely based on a standardized, impersonal factory model adopted a century ago. This model incorporates deeply embedded inequalities that dare many of our children to learn.

While many educators have sought to transform this system—and some have succeeded in redesigning individual schools for greater equity and success²—the fundamental features of the factory model live on in both our policies and many of our practices. At this moment in history, when students, families, and educators are trying to recover from a public health crisis, an economic crisis, and a crisis of civil rights and democracy, it is imperative to reinvent our education system so that it can support successful learning that prepares each and every child for a rapidly changing world—one in which young people will need to work with knowledge that has not yet been discovered, using technologies that have yet to be invented, solving major problems we have not yet been able to solve.

At a time when our nation is increasingly polarized and when there are strong efforts to dismantle progress made to support diversity, inclusion, and equity, it is also important to reaffirm our commitment to education for equity and democracy that supports our collective future. This will require an explicit attempt to redesign our schools and systems to support each and every child for equitable and empowering education—not just for “covering the curriculum” or “getting through the book.”

Schools that have been successfully redesigned in prior eras of reform—many of them during the 1990s and early 2000s—offer a powerful evidence-based blueprint to create schools that are more humane, enriching, and productive than our current models. The raw material to reimagine schooling is happening across the country and is showcased throughout this report.

We Dare Young People to Learn

Too many of our young people still experience the factory model evident in most of our high schools, which were designed to put young people on a conveyor belt and move them from one overloaded teacher to the next, in 45-minute increments, to be stamped with separate, disconnected lessons 7 or 8 times a day, with a hallway locker as their only stable point of contact. We dare them to learn in schools where they have little opportunity to become well known over a sustained period of time by adults who can consider them as whole people or as developing intellects. We dare young people to learn when their needs for resources or personal advice require standing in line or waiting weeks to see a counselor with a caseload of 500 or more students. We dare too many of our young people to make it through huge warehouse institutions focused substantially on the control of behavior rather than the development of community. While these factory-model designs may have worked for the purposes they were asked to serve 100 years ago, they do not meet most of our young people's needs today.

A Day in the Life of a Factory-Model High School

Consider what it would be like if your job were organized like the work students do in a typical American high school: When you arrive at the office, you are seated at a desk and you start working; then, 45 minutes later somebody rings a bell that requires you to jump up and go to your next job. So you run to another desk in another part of the building with a new boss, who has different rules and different expectations—a whole different agenda for you to accomplish—and you sit down and try to figure out how to do the job for 45 minutes, and then another bell rings. You jump up and run to another part of the building and do another job for another boss with different rules and expectations for 45 minutes. You do this 7 or 8 times during the day. Some of the rules are explicit, but many of them are tacit. You are supposed to figure out for yourself what your boss cares about and what they will pay attention to when evaluating your work. Most of your bosses do not know you well, because they see 30 or so employees every 45 minutes and rarely get to talk deeply to any of them one-on-one. If you get confused, many of your bosses will say, “Don’t talk to your coworkers; that’s cheating. Do your own work.” Under these circumstances, how productive do you think you would be?

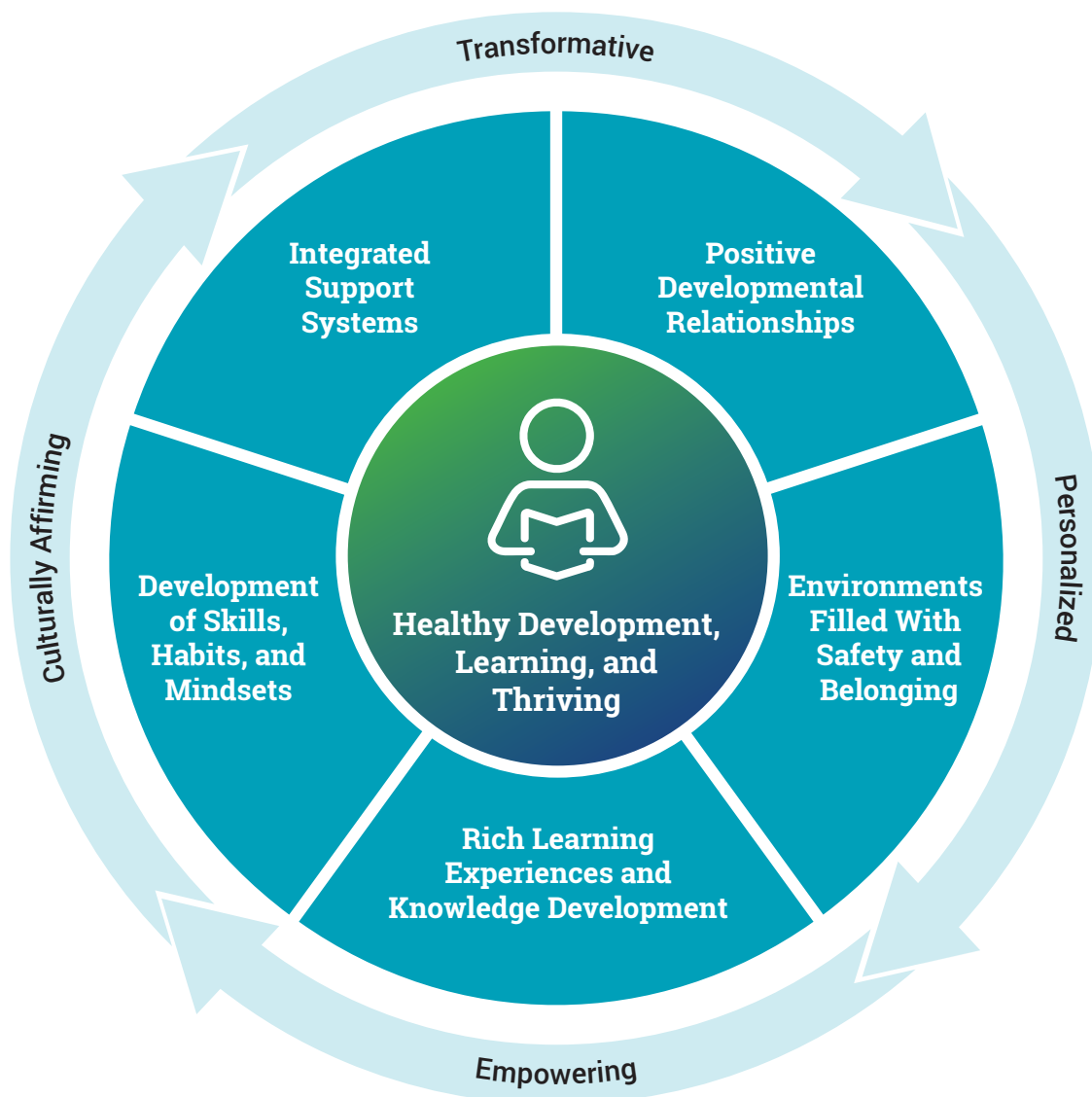
There is a growing realization that many of our schools are not designed to educate the next generation to face the challenges of our time. In the face of a global pandemic, it has become clear that most schools must be better able to personalize learning and create caring spaces for students to address the effects of trauma, meet their needs, and support their learning. And schools must do more than weather a crisis; we need our young people prepared with the knowledge and skills to face even greater challenges in the years to come.

We Know More About How to Support Learning and Development

There is also a growing consensus that we know what works for educating students. In recent years, our understanding of the science of learning and development has deepened considerably.³ We know that, with the right supports, every young person can succeed in school and in life. Human brains are incredibly malleable and responsive to experiences. Young people grow and thrive in environments designed to support individualized development; where they have strong, supportive relationships; and where their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs are met.

The Science of Learning and Development Alliance identifies five guiding principles of such schools: (1) positive developmental relationships; (2) environments filled with safety and belonging; (3) rich learning experiences and knowledge development; (4) explicit development of skills, habits, and mindsets; and (5) integrated support systems. (See [Figure 1.](#))

Figure 1. Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design



Source: Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children (now Center for Whole-Child Education). (2021). *Design principles for schools: Putting the science of learning and development into action.*

There are classrooms and schools across the nation that create these conditions for young people and did so even throughout the pandemic.⁴ Evidence shows that their students fared much better than those in less personalized and less supportive settings. However, the system we work in today was invented a century ago for another time and another mission—the processing of large numbers of students for rote skills, with the expectation that many would drop out and join the lines of factory workers who were once

needed. It was never designed to support all students to develop high levels of performance or to meet their broader needs. Caring and dedicated teachers, administrators, and parents work hard every day within this system to stretch it to meet students' needs and to educate them for more ambitious thinking and performance skills—and yet their efforts are often stymied by outmoded institutional structures.

Many teachers, principals, and district leaders, along with students and parents, understand that schools must change in fundamental ways if they are to accomplish the goal we now have for them: teaching our diverse student population for higher-order thinking and deep understanding. Yet the inertia of existing systems is powerful. The good news is that models exist: A number of schools that have been extraordinarily effective and have helped other schools to replicate their success have important lessons to offer, based on the elements they hold in common.

This publication outlines 10 of those lessons that constitute evidence-based features of effective redesigned high schools that help create the kind of education many of us want for all of our children: safe environments where exciting and rigorous academic work occurs and where all groups of students succeed academically, graduate at high levels, and go on to college and productive work. (See [Figure 2](#).) The 10 features of successfully redesigned schools include:

1. Positive developmental relationships
2. Safe, inclusive school climate
3. Culturally responsive and sustaining teaching
4. Deeper learning curriculum
5. Student-centered pedagogy
6. Authentic assessment
7. Well-prepared and well-supported teachers
8. Authentic family engagement
9. Community connections and integrated student supports
10. Shared decision-making and leadership

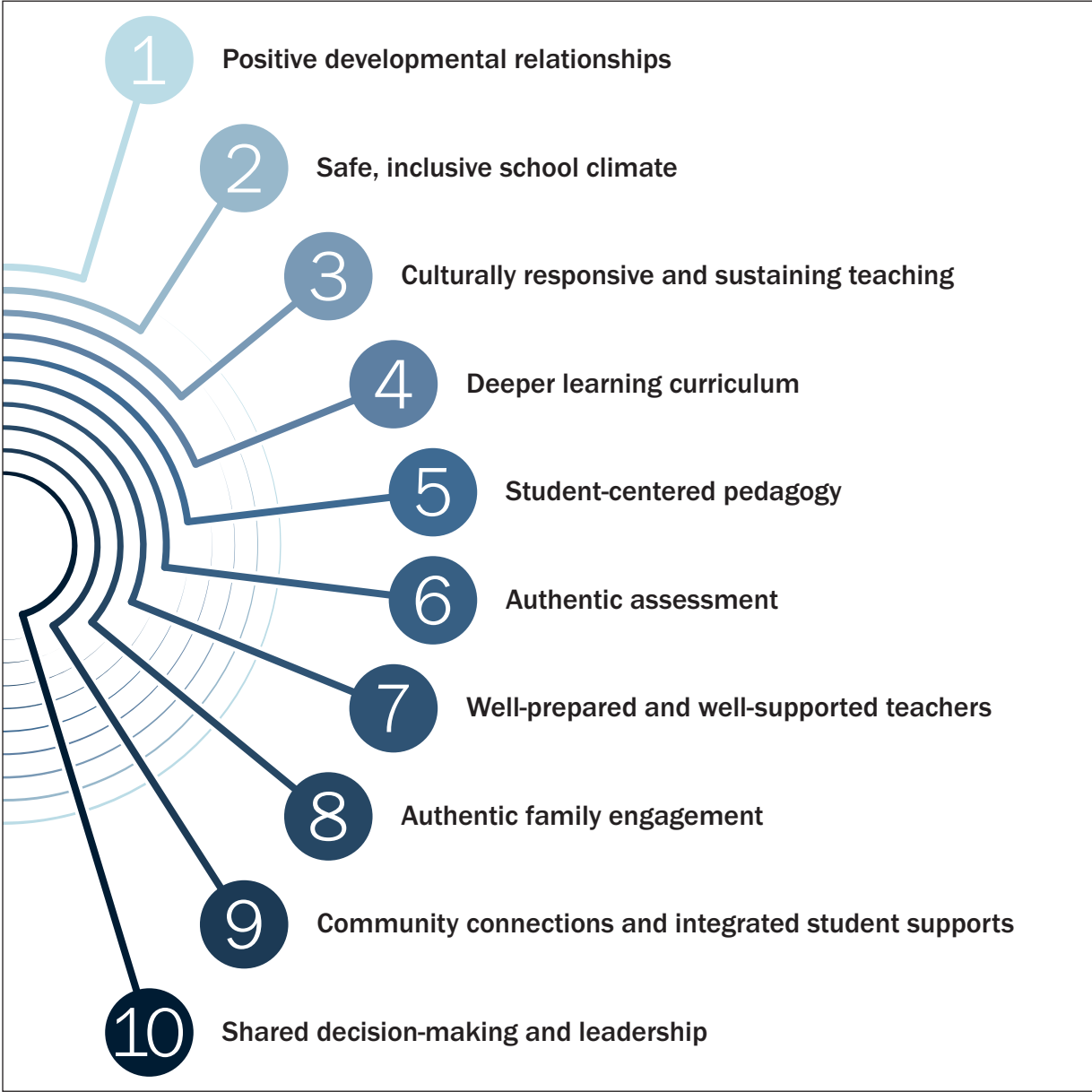
Each of the 10 core chapters in this volume is accompanied by multiple examples of schools that are putting these features into practice and creating powerful learning opportunities for their students. The design features include school structures that promote meaningful, sustained relationships among teachers and students; curriculum and instructional practices that help all students achieve at high levels; approaches that ensure teachers are experts at their craft; and strategies for involving families in schools and making decisions democratically.

While successful schools include all these elements, they enact each feature in distinctive ways. There are many initiatives underway to transform secondary schools so that students have opportunities for meaningful learning, personalized supports, and connections to their futures: Linked Learning and other college and career pathway models that offer experiential learning; Early College and other dual enrollment opportunities; community schools that organize supports and connect learning to community concerns; and strategies that support social and emotional development through restorative practices, service learning, and civic engagement. Schools need to create means for enacting their goals that respond to their local contexts and work for the students, parents, and faculty members of their communities.

To sustain these initiatives, structures and systems must also change. We take up these issues in the final chapter and appendixes of this publication, in which we discuss the staffing and scheduling models that can enable school redesign, as well as the district and state policies that are needed to support schools that develop each student’s abilities in more powerful ways.

The process of transforming schools is hard work. There is no progress without struggle. As we undertake this struggle together, we should remember the words that Langston Hughes used to describe our collective quest to build a better world: “Keep your hand on the plow. Hold on.”⁵

Figure 2. 10 Features of Successfully Redesigned Schools



Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).



Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships

“School should not be mass production. It should be loving and close. This is what kids need; you need love to learn.”

—Student at Vanguard High School⁶

What Students Need

Human brains develop in response to positive relationships, experiences, and environments, and a high-quality education starts with relationships. We see this on the most basic level when a baby learns to talk to communicate with others and to walk because they want to reach the loving arms of their caregiver. Scientists have shown that emotions and cognition are closely linked; positive relationships create the conditions that allow young people to develop their attention, focus, memory, and other neural processes essential to learning.

Relationships also allow adults to know what makes young people unique. People have wonderfully diverse neural structures, as well as backgrounds and experiences. There is no such thing as an “average” brain⁷ or an average learner. Students thrive and learn when educators know who they are and how they learn best.⁸

Effective schools create structures that allow for the time and space needed to support positive developmental relationships between adults and young people, and among young people themselves. Teachers can help young people learn more effectively when they know their students well, both emotionally and intellectually. Students need support from adults and classmates they know and trust. When schools are designed to encourage such relationships, they can create a cultural context that reinforces cognitive development and allows young people to thrive. This is particularly important for adolescents, who seek strong senses of connection, belonging, and personal identity.

These kinds of relationships are difficult to develop in schools designed on the factory model, where students may see seven or eight teachers a day for 45 or 50 minutes at a time over the course of a semester, and teachers see 150 students or more every day. This structure precludes teachers from getting to know each student well, which is made even more difficult when teachers work in isolation from one another with little time to plan together or share their knowledge about what students need. Despite the fact that teachers care deeply about their students, it is not possible to care effectively for all of their needs in this structure. As a result, a recent survey of U.S. secondary school students found that less than 30% felt they were in a school that offered a caring environment.⁹

The lack of close supportive relationships may lead students—especially those who have experienced trauma or who have unmet needs—to behave in ways that trigger punishment rather than support. The environment often focuses more on enforcement of rules and control of behavior than on getting to know students well so that their needs can be understood and addressed.

A California high school student in a large factory-model school explained his experience: “This place hurts my spirit.” An administrator in the same school voiced the dilemma of caring educators caught in the disjunct between students and the system: “My spirit is hurt, too, when I have to do things I don’t

believe in.”¹⁰ Heavily stratified within and substantially dehumanized throughout, the factory-model school, which we inherited from the efficiency experts of so many years ago, creates a context in which many students experience schools as not caring, even adversarial, environments, where “getting through” becomes the goal when getting known is impossible. But school does not have to be like this.

Key Practices

Smaller Learning Communities

Over the past few decades, educational research has suggested that, all else being equal, small learning communities of 300–500 students—whether small schools or smaller units within large schools—tend to produce significantly better results for students, including better attendance, greater participation in extracurricular activities, stronger academic achievement, higher grades, fewer failed courses, fewer behavioral incidents, less violence and vandalism, lower dropout rates, and higher graduation rates.¹¹ These results are the most pronounced for students who are typically least well served by traditional schools. In study after study of successful small schools and small learning communities within large schools, students compare their school to a family rather than a factory and link their academic achievement to their caring relationships with teachers.

Yet it is important to recognize that “small” is not enough. The key is not overall school size but rather how schools create strong, developmental relationships and leverage a web of relationships to create a caring community that supports increased learning and a safety net to prevent students from falling through the cracks. Larger secondary schools have redesigned themselves into smaller learning communities to achieve similar results.

The key is not overall school size but rather how schools create strong, developmental relationships and leverage a web of relationships to create a caring community.

“**Houses**” or “**academies**” are two common structures for creating smaller learning communities within larger secondary schools. The house system was a feature of schools in England during the 19th century, much like the houses of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin in the Harry Potter series. In U.S. schools today, houses are essentially cohorts of students and teachers (usually 300–400 students) that form a smaller unit with its own identity and intentional community. Each house has its own lead teacher or assistant principal, its own teaching and counseling staff, and a stable group of students who work together over multiple years.

In many schools with small learning communities, students spend part of the day in their houses and part of the day outside them. For example, often world language, arts programs, or sports are outside their house so students can choose different options (although there are also academy programs that focus on world language and arts). This arrangement allows students to build stronger relationships within the cohort but also have some choice in their schedules for electives and extracurriculars that spark their interest.

Teaching teams can personalize instruction further. For example, some middle and high schools have structures through which a group of students takes English language arts, social studies, science, and math from the same team of teachers, who may sometimes follow the students to the next grade level as well. Within each team, teachers can plan interdisciplinary curricular units and work together to support students' social, emotional, and academic needs. Students can build community and take leadership within the cohort as well. English learners and students with disabilities are integrated into cohorts rather than isolated in segregated settings. The team may include a special education teacher and/or an English language development teacher, depending on students' needs. In some high schools, students have one teaching team for 9th and 10th grades and then switch to another cohort and team for 11th and 12th grades, with cohorts sometimes linked to career pathways or other themes, which students choose based on their interests.

In Practice: Teaching Teams

Vista High School, a large comprehensive high school serving more than 2,300 diverse students in a small suburban and rural community outside of San Diego, CA, has used a house system to build relationships among students and educators. The freshman class is typically broken into six houses of 100–130 students each that share a set of four teachers to cover core subjects and one special education teacher. Each house is located in a dedicated area of the Vista High School campus, and each team works to define how spaces in and around their classrooms and house could be used to meet the learning needs of students, reimagining how the grouping of students and grouping of teachers within that space and time could positively impact student learning.

At Oakland International High School (OIHS) in Oakland, CA, an interdisciplinary team of four core content-area teachers (English language arts, math, science, and history/social studies) stays with a group of 80–100 students for 2 years, with a counselor attached to the cohort. This provides students with the opportunity to interact with the same set of teachers and counselor consistently so they can make stronger bonds and connections. OIHS is a member of the Internationals Network for Public Schools—a network of high schools serving new immigrant students across the country and that supports these kinds of relationship-centered teaching designs in all of its schools.

Sources: Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., & Edgerton, A. K. (with Badrinarayan, A., Cardichon, J., Cookson, P. W., Jr., Griffith, M., Klevan, S., ... Wojcikiewicz, S.). (2020). *Restarting and reinventing school: Learning in the time of COVID and beyond*. Learning Policy Institute; Roc, M., Ross, P., & Hernández, L. E. (2019). *Internationals Network for Public Schools: A deeper learning approach to supporting English learners*. Learning Policy Institute.

Student-Centered Staffing Models

Creating the conditions for strong, developmental relationships means rethinking the factory-model school designs we have inherited. For the young people and the adults in a school to be well known to each other, the school usually must have a way for students to relate to a smaller group of trusted peers on a regular basis and for teachers to have fewer students to work with at a time.

Of course, many schools and districts stop right there and say, “That’s impossible—we don’t have the money to hire more teachers.” However, schools can make great strides toward personalization without spending more—if they are willing to reorganize and place relationships at the core. This is partly because in the United States, teaching is highly departmentalized and class periods are very short, and partly because we organize schools to place too many staff in roles outside of core classroom teaching. Only about 47% of educational employees in the United States are classroom teachers,¹² as compared to more than 70% in many countries.¹³ In the United States, pupil–teacher ratios average 15 students per teacher¹⁴—and yet, in many high schools, students still sit in classrooms with 30 or more classmates, and teachers must juggle the needs of 150 or more students each day.

This is in part because of the way teachers’ time is designed and used. Specialization by subject matter courses increases the number of students teachers see. In addition, many out-of-classroom positions—ranging from school resource officers and hall monitors to behavior deans—are required for the management needs of factory-model schools. When schools are redesigned for relationships, the need for these roles declines because relationships can be used to prevent and resolve problems. A different staffing model is possible in schools organized for personalization.

Investing in Teachers. Redesigned high schools typically offer significantly reduced pupil loads for teachers (usually in the range of 80–100 students per teacher) by rethinking their use of staff and time. This allows teachers to focus more on the individual needs of their students. One way that schools reduce pupil load and class size is by allocating more of their resources to hiring teachers rather than nonteaching staff and assigning more staff to be regularly engaged in classroom teaching rather than to roles outside the classroom. Most large traditional schools have a bigger administrative staff, and they often hire people to run special programs, such as dropout prevention and compensatory education, that exist to solve problems that arise because students are not getting enough personal attention in the classroom. These programs and positions rarely solve the core problems that are a result of depersonalized instruction, and they become less necessary when students feel that they can turn to their teachers for personal as well as academic support—and when resources are redirected to the classroom so teachers have few enough students that they can spend more time on each one.

Allocating more resources to classroom instruction may mean hiring fewer administrators or other nonteaching staff and pushing in specialists to the classroom, rather than pulling them out to organize teaching. For example, many high schools now use an “inclusion” or “push-in” approach to supporting students with special education needs, so special education teachers coteach with general education teachers rather than pulling students out of the classroom. (Of course, this model requires common preparation time for the teachers to collaborate effectively and take advantage of the reduced pupil loads.)

Reducing teachers’ pupil loads may also be accomplished by offering fewer electives and partnering with other organizations for some tasks that can be handled in new ways. For example, some redesigned high schools partner with community colleges in dual credit options that support many electives, including some advanced courses in world languages or other subjects that enroll fewer students. This allows teachers to carry smaller course loads overall and smaller class sizes in core courses.

Block Scheduling. Many secondary schools also reduce pupil loads for teachers by having teachers teach fewer groups of students for longer blocks of time. Some forms of block scheduling strengthen relationships by reducing course loads for both teachers and students. Many high schools use either a “4x4” block schedule, in which students take four courses in the fall semester and four in the spring semester, or an “A/B” block schedule, in which students may take courses on alternating days of the week for the full year. Each course meets for approximately 90 minutes per day rather than the typical 45 minutes. This system cuts teachers’ typical pupil loads in half and allows teachers to plan lessons that include engaging elements such as group work, hands-on problem-solving, presentations, and project-based learning. Meanwhile, students can focus on fewer subjects at once and do more rigorous work in each one, with more time in class for peer collaboration and inquiry-based learning along with direct instruction. Some schools operate daily block schedule courses for the full academic year, which gives students an even more in-depth experience in each area. Research suggests that this full-year model of block scheduling is particularly important for success in math courses.¹⁵

Interdisciplinary Courses. Another way to personalize instruction and reduce a teacher’s pupil load is to create interdisciplinary courses.¹⁶ In a humanities course in which one teacher is responsible for both English and social studies, for example, they can have half as many students for a longer block of time (usually 70–120 minutes). Many middle schools and some high schools create interdisciplinary humanities and math/science courses that are taught in block schedules, and they further personalize learning by enabling the teaching teams to focus on a shared group of students around whom they can plan instruction and supports.

Structures for Stronger Relationships Over Time

Effective schools are not only designed to support strong relationships; they are also structured to allow these relationships to develop *over time*. Ever since the United States adopted the Prussian age-grading system in the late 1800s, the practice of handing off students to a different teacher each year has undergirded the age-old teachers’ complaint about how we lose so much ground with our students with all the start-ups and wind-downs that occur each year. This phenomenon is even worse for secondary teachers, who may have a chance to get to know only a small portion of their students in a detailed way by midyear.

Looping. When students and teachers stay together for multiple years—a strategy called looping—they do not have to spend all that time reestablishing relationships and developing norms and routines, and they can devote much more time to the business of learning. Looping is common in schools in many other countries and is used in many redesigned middle and high schools. In some schools, the 9th-grade teachers stay with their students as they move up to 10th grade and shift to teaching the 10th-grade curriculum; the following year, they return to teaching 9th grade and take on a new cohort of students. (See, for example, the [school profile on Hillsdale High School](#) at the end of this chapter). This approach allows teachers to know their students and families well, to organize their teaching to take advantage of student strengths and experiences, and to address student needs.

Among students, staying together in a cohort with the same teachers over time increases the sense of community—and enables everyone to benefit from the community building that has been explicitly undertaken in the first year—while reducing the tension that often comes with negotiating a new set of

peers, especially for students who are more vulnerable. Conflicts are less likely because students develop trust. Research shows positive effects of looping that allow teachers and students to work together for longer periods of time.¹⁷

A 7th- and 8th-grade teacher in Daly City, CA, who teaches an interdisciplinary math and science course sequence to the same students over 2 years, explained how looping supports increased achievement for students who are often marginalized in school:

I've had my students in math and science class for 2 years now. What strikes me most is the progress of students who often get lost in the system—the shy ones who now ask questions because they trust me, the unmotivated ones who now come in for help because they know I'll be supportive, and the defiant ones who now recognize that I'm an ally who cares for them. These are the kids who need adults' support the most, but it takes them the longest to develop relationships. Looping gives us the time to make these relationships happen.¹⁸

Often looping in secondary school is accomplished through the use of the small learning community cohorts previously described, which organize a team of teachers to work with a shared group of students, or advisories (see the following section in this chapter) that stay together for either 2 or 4 years. In some small learning communities, 9th- and 10th-grade humanities courses are taught in **mixed-grade classrooms**, with a 2-year curriculum cycle. Each classroom is evenly split between 9th-graders and 10th-graders, and differentiation is the norm as teachers establish systems to support and challenge students at many different skill levels to grow on a developmental path. Each year, a new group of 9th-graders comes in, but the other half of the class are returning 10th-graders who already know classroom norms and routines and help mentor the new students. The teacher does not have to spend weeks at the beginning of the year establishing a positive classroom culture because the older students guide and support the younger ones from day one. Researchers have found that these kinds of multiage, multilevel classrooms can be extremely successful for all kinds of students.¹⁹

Longer Grade Spans. There is also research suggesting that schools with longer grade spans, such as K–8 at the elementary level or 6–12 at the secondary level, support better student outcomes due to the longer-term relationships that are formed and the elimination of at least one disruptive transition between elementary school and secondary school.²⁰ In general, continuity is very important to student confidence and sense of well-being, and it facilitates students and their families understanding their environment and being well known. The findings about the gains in achievement that accompany elimination of the middle school transition may also be associated with the fact that many middle schools are not designed with the personalized supports described here that enable students to thrive.

Continuity is very important to student confidence and sense of well-being, and it facilitates students and their families understanding their environment and being well known.

In Practice: Continuity and Personalization in a Large School

UCLA Community School (UCLA-CS) is an example of a redesigned campus and set of schools that have adopted all the features described in this chapter to support positive developmental relationships and personalization for students. It is located on the Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) Community Schools campus on the former site of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. A study tour of the Julia Richman Educational Complex in New York City informed the multiage design of UCLA-CS, which serves 4,000 students in six small schools, with some starting in transitional kindergarten (TK). The schools are the Ambassador School of Global Education (TK–5), Ambassador School of Global Leadership (6–12), New Open World Academy (TK–12), Los Angeles High School of the Arts (9–12), School for the Visual Arts and Humanities (9–12), and UCLA-CS (TK–12).

All the schools on the RFK Community Schools campus function as community schools that partner with a variety of organizations. They were created as pilot schools, part of a union- and community-based reform to support innovation by giving a set of schools autonomy of curriculum and governance in exchange for increased accountability. The schools share a common social justice vision and collaborate on sports teams and community events.

UCLA-CS was designed as a pair of schools (TK–8 and 9–12) serving 950 students for their entire school career. The design is intended to foster close and sustained relationships with students and families. As of the 2022–23 school year, most students (83%) were Latino/a; 8% were Asian American or Pacific Islander; 4% were Filipino; 2% were African American; and 2% were White. Almost all students (95%) come from low-income families; 14% of students have disabilities; and 32% are classified as English learners. Almost all students (95%) report that they use a language other than English to communicate with their families.

One of only four non-charter TK–12 schools in Los Angeles Unified School District, UCLA-CS is pioneering structures for personalized multiage learning. Students progress through the elementary grades in three multiage “dens,” staying with the same teacher and classmates for 2 years—a form of looping designed to create a strong, supportive community for children that enables teachers to personalize learning. As students transition from the lower grades, the middle school continues to provide a nurturing, student-centered learning community through both a formal advisory system and the intentional grouping of students and teachers.

In 6th grade, students have two core content teachers (math/science and humanities), who also serve as their advisors. In 7th and 8th grades, students rotate across core classes and seminars, receiving support from the same advisor for 2 years. At the end of 8th grade, students transition to high school and are joined by a new cohort of students who enter from neighboring middle schools, doubling the size of the grade-level student cohorts from 60 in TK–8 to approximately 120 students in 9th through 12th grades. High school students learn in an 8-period rotating block schedule designed to support the longer time needed for active, inquiry-based learning. An advisory program anchors the high school, with students staying with the same advisor for 4 years, which helps them build strong, caring relationships.

These strategies also promote student success: In 2020–21, 100% of high school students in UCLA-CS were enrolled in the “A-G” courses required for University of California system and California State University system admissions, and 80% of graduates had successfully completed the rigorous sequence, far above district and state averages. That year the UCLA-CS graduation rate was 89%, also above district and state averages, despite the far larger proportion of students from low-income households served by the school.

Source: Quartz, K. H. (2023). *UCLA Community School: Celebrating language, culture, and community*. Learning Policy Institute.

Advisory Systems for Supporting Student Success

Advisory Groups. Advisory structures are becoming more common in secondary schools as a strategy to promote strong relationships and ensure that no student falls through the cracks. Advisory groups place 15–20 students together with a faculty advisor several times a week for ongoing academic and personal counseling and support. Ideally, this advisor is also one of the student’s teachers or counselors, so advisory serves as an extension of an existing relationship. When students form a cohort taught by a shared teaching team (which may also include a counselor and a resource teacher), advisories are constructed for that cohort within that team. Many studies showing the positive impact of redesigned secondary schools note that advisories are a key strategy for personalization and improving student outcomes.²¹

Staff Advisory Roles. Advisory teachers are advocates for their students, and they often serve as the main adult point of contact for their advisees, gathering information from other teachers about what the young people need and spearheading efforts to support them. To strengthen relationships with families, advisory teachers call home frequently and host student–parent conferences. These conferences are usually student led and help ensure that families understand what students are working on and what they can do to support their success. In high school, conferences provide an opportunity for students and their families to discuss postsecondary plans and ensure students are taking the appropriate coursework for the college or career path they want to pursue. (See also [Feature 8: Authentic Family Engagement](#).)

Advisory systems are also a form of distributed counseling that ensures attention to each student on a regular basis, not just those who can be seen occasionally by a counselor. Rather than asking guidance counselors with caseloads in the hundreds to take all the responsibility for giving all students personal attention, schools extend the reach of counseling by creating a structure through which teachers serving as advisors are given time to work with small numbers of students. In these smaller groups, teachers create a community within which students can share their experiences, learn social-emotional skills, check in with a caring adult on academics and other matters, and access additional resources. Advisors are informed by the expertise of counselors, for example, around how to support students who have experienced trauma, on the one hand, and how to support students in their college application processes, on the other. Advisors are often the point of contact for parents and other teachers to ensure that a student’s needs are known. They also equip teachers to provide referrals to counseling and other resources that students need.

These small student–adult ratios are achieved by having nearly every professional staff member in the school take responsibility for an advisory, which becomes a regular part of their load rather than an add-on. In many cases, teachers advise students they also teach in class, thus increasing the amount of time they spend together. At many schools, students stay with the same advisor for at least 2 years—thus building on existing relationships over extended periods of time.

Advisory Curriculum. Successful advisories feel like an “in-school family”; they are the place where students build relationships with one another as well as with the advisory teacher. This requires intentional curriculum and skillful facilitation, often beginning with **community circles**, which are a structured space for building community to allow every student to feel safe and included. (For more on community circles, including the role they can play in restorative practices, see [Feature 2: Safe, Inclusive School Climate](#).) Advisories are often used not only to touch base with students about their needs but also to teach a social-emotional learning curriculum, including strategies like conflict resolution that are shared across the school; to check with students about their academic work and connect students to after-school or tutoring support as needed; and to help students explore college and other post–high school options. In many cases, advisory groups take field trips to colleges and fill out college applications and financial forms in the first semester of students’ senior year.

Effective advisory programs often also have **ritualized weekly routines** that involve social-emotional curricula as well as opportunities for the students themselves to take leadership roles and build a sense of collective identity. Most include space for fun activities that allow students to enjoy one another’s company. For example, in one advisory, students might collaborate to do the daily Wordle game, while in another, students might take turns bringing in board games for a weekly game session.

When implementing advisory programs, it is important to think carefully about how the time will be used and provide staff with time for planning and preparation. Otherwise, if teachers are overwhelmed by other responsibilities, advisories can easily devolve into a “homeroom” period in which young people stare at their phones. Effective schools consider advisory to be a teaching period that is built into teachers’ schedules just as any other course, with appropriate prep time and curricular support.

In Practice: Advisory Models

At Bronxdale High School in New York City, all students have an advisory class several times a week. The activities in advisory support social and emotional learning, academics, college and career readiness, and community building. Teachers who serve as advisors support this curriculum; counsel students; and serve as the adult links to families for information, support, and problem-solving of all kinds. Peer leaders, trained in restorative practices, also guide some advisory activities. As one guidance counselor explained: “Advisory is where the safe, supportive culture starts and then spreads through the whole school.”

Schools affiliated with Big Picture Learning—a network of secondary schools that engage students in interest-driven and real-world learning experiences—implement an advisory model to support learning and development. Advisories are made up of approximately 12–25 students, and students remain in their cohort with an advisor for their 4 years of high school. A typical day at a Big Picture Learning school begins with advisory, where advisors convene students in a circle to discuss current events, social issues, and students’ personal and family lives. Giving students space and agency to discuss public and private events, these circles serve to build relationships and simultaneously address students’ social-emotional needs. In addition to hosting circles, advisories serve as forums where students engage in personalized learning. Advisors often allot time during advisory to confer with students individually about their academic progress and needs, to pose questions that help identify students’ interests as they are developing internships, to help them develop robust projects, and to guide them through project completion.

Sources: Aness, J., Rogers, B., Duncan Grand, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). *Teaching the way students learn best: Lessons from Bronxdale High School*. Learning Policy Institute; Bradley, K., & Hernández, L. E. (2019). *Big Picture Learning: Spreading relationships, relevance, and rigor one student at a time*. Learning Policy Institute.

As schools reallocate their resources to provide smaller classes and lower pupil loads for teachers, to create advisory systems, and to keep teachers and students together for multiple years, they also need to figure out how to provide teachers with significant time for collaborative planning and professional development, which is essential if teachers are to provide the support that students need to succeed (see [Feature 7: Well-Prepared and Well-Supported Teachers](#)). Since school budgets are finite, trade-offs are involved in the redesign process: For example, schools may secure more time for professional development by banking instructional time on some days to free up time on other days, allowing slightly larger classes, or supporting more student time in out-of-school learning experiences such as community service or internships. They may offer fewer elective courses and use dual credit options with community colleges to add variety to course offerings. Successful schools have balanced these priorities to create structures that are more effective in supporting student success than those in traditional school models. For more information on these trade-offs, see the [Hillsdale High School profile](#) in this chapter and [Appendix A: Sample Budget and Staffing Models](#).

Although the work of redesigning high schools for personalization can be challenging, it is essential if we want all students to learn to their full potential. As a student at Vanguard High School (a member school of the New York Performance Standards Consortium) reminds us, “School should not be mass production. It should be loving and close. This is what kids need; you need love to learn.”²²

School Profile: Redesigning for Rigor and Relationships at Hillsdale High School



Photo provided by Hillsdale High School.

[Hillsdale High School](#) in San Mateo, CA, serves just over 1,600 students in an urban/suburban community, with a student body that, in 2022, was 35% Latino/a, 16% Asian, 17% other students of color (American Indian, Black, Filipino, multiracial, and Pacific Islander), and 32% White. Thirteen percent of students were English learners.

Twenty years ago, the school undertook a teacher-led conversion from a traditional school to a redesigned school organized around **small learning communities** that created teaching teams and advisories while de-tracking most classes. The results of this conversion were gains in student achievement and graduation rates, even as the school became more diverse. As of 2022, 96% of students were enrolled in the college preparatory course sequence required by the state universities, and 75% graduated having completed all those courses. Student achievement in English language arts and math far surpassed state averages.

Each fall, incoming students are placed equitably by demographic backgrounds and current achievement levels into one of three 9th- and 10th-grade **houses** named Florence, Kyoto, and Oaxaca after important medieval cities, in keeping with the school's mascot, the Knight. In the 9th and 10th grades, **teams of four teachers** (math, science, English, and social science) share approximately 112 students, serve as advisors for their students, and loop with their cohort

of students so they teach the students for 2 years. The teachers have common preparation periods and communicate regularly about the students they have in common, coordinate learning activities, and integrate curriculum to create deeper and more authentic learning experiences. There are no separate honors courses; all 9th-graders take Geometry together and then either move into Algebra I or Algebra II in 10th grade, depending on whether they took Algebra I in 8th grade.

Students in the 11th and 12th grades are divided into three “upper division” houses (Cusco, Jakarta, and Timbuktu), named after other cities throughout the world that have made major contributions to culture and society. They also have advisors who teach core classes or electives or are administrators. While there is more specialization of courses, upper division teachers, like their colleagues in the 9th- and 10th-grade houses, share students, collaboration periods, and advisory curriculum and stay with their students for 2 years.

Advisory is a key component of both lower division and upper division houses. It meets every day, usually for about 30 minutes, and is considered a full part of teachers’ course loads. House teams meet every week to plan advisory curriculum together, following a general schoolwide scope and sequence but with the autonomy to develop detailed curriculum that is unique to their house and tailored to the needs of their students. Advisory curriculum is often based around weekly rituals: For example, every Monday might include time for one-on-one check-ins, and every Friday might be for community building. Across the school, Wednesday’s advisory period is always “Tutorial,” where students can visit any one of their teachers to make up a test, get extra help, or collaborate with peers. Lower division advisory curriculum includes key culture-building topics such as the use of language, consent, and cybersafety. Upper division advisory curriculum includes a focus on life after high school, including intensive support with college applications and career planning.

In upper division grades, students have a greater choice of courses, including community college classes, so they spend less of the day with their houses, but house teachers and advisors still play a critical role in supporting students with the school’s unique graduation requirement, a yearlong senior capstone project. With support, students design their own inquiry or performance project in a subject of their choosing: math, science, English, social studies, world language, visual or performing arts, physical or health education, English language development, child development, computer science, or leadership. Before graduation, students present and defend their capstone projects, along with a reflection on their academic work and their postsecondary plans.

Successful implementation of small learning communities and advisory requires significant **time for collaboration among the staff**. Hillsdale has an 8-period school day: Students take seven courses plus advisory, and teachers teach 5 of the 8 periods in a mix of 90-minute blocks on most days and 45-minute periods on Mondays and Fridays. (See [Figure 3](#).) Advisory is treated just like any other course, so teachers who serve as advisors teach four academic courses plus advisory. This leaves them with 3 planning periods—one to meet with their academic content team (e.g., all biology teachers share this prep period and use the time to coplan curriculum), one to meet with their house team to plan advisory and engage in what is known as “kid talk” (thinking together about individual students in their house and how best to support them), and the third to use as their individual prep period.

Figure 3. 2023–24 Hillsdale High School Bell Schedule

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
0 Period 7:30 - 8:25	0 Period 7:30 - 8:25	0 Period 7:30 - 8:25	0 Period 7:30 - 8:25	Period 2 8:30 - 9:57
Period 1 8:30 - 9:17	Period 1 8:30 - 9:57	Period 2 8:30 - 9:57	Period 1 8:30 - 9:57	Brunch 9:57 - 10:07
Period 2 9:22 - 10:09	Brunch 9:57 - 10:07	Brunch 9:57 - 10:07	Brunch 9:57 - 10:07	Advisory 10:12 - 11:01
Brunch 10:09 - 10:19	Advisory 10:12 - 10:39	Tutorial 10:12 - 11:01	Advisory 10:12 - 10:39	Period 4 11:06 - 12:33
Advisory 10:24 - 10:55	Period 3 10:44 - 12:11	Period 4 11:06 - 12:33	Period 3 10:44 - 12:11	Lunch 12:33 - 1:03
Period 3 11:00 - 11:47	Lunch 12:11 - 12:41	Lunch 12:33 - 1:03	Lunch 12:11 - 12:41	Period 6 1:08 - 2:35
Period 4 11:52 - 12:39	Period 5 12:46 - 2:13	Period 6 1:08 - 2:35	Period 5 12:46 - 2:13	
Lunch 12:39 - 1:09	Period 7 2:18 - 3:45		Period 7 2:18 - 3:45	
Period 5 1:14 - 2:01				
Period 6 2:06 - 2:53				
Period 7 2:58 - 3:45				

Source: Hillsdale High School. 2023–2024 Hillsdale bell schedule.

A week in the life of a typical Hillsdale teacher: On Monday, a 10th-grade English teacher in Kyoto House teaches 1st- and 2nd-period English (her classroom is next door to her social studies partner with whom she collaborates), sees her advisory for 30 minutes after brunch—a time that supports students’ physical and social needs—and then she has a collaboration time during 3rd period to work with her English team on curriculum and instruction. She teaches 4th-period English, has lunch, teaches 5th-period English, and then her Kyoto advisory team meets during 6th period to plan advisory and engage in “kid talk” about supporting students. She has 7th period as a prep period. The other days of the week, there are longer block periods. On Wednesdays and Fridays, the schedule allows for early release for further professional learning, community collaboration, whole-school professional development, department meetings, and house or governance meetings.

Hillsdale’s decision to structure the school for personalization has required trade-offs. In addition to common planning periods, the school has 54 advisory sections built into the master schedule—the equivalent of adding 10 full-time staff positions. Principal Jeff Gilbert notes that the school has given up some things, such as a classified support positions, academic support classes (which were not being used effectively), and some electives. To replace some of these elective opportunities, the school has expanded its partnership with a local community college, where many seniors now take courses, many of them for dual credit. All administrators also serve as advisors, effectively adding 80% of a teaching position to the budget, while keeping administrators connected to students and to their staff colleagues. “It’s not easy, but each year we chip away at it and make the budget work,” explains Principal Gilbert, “because we’ve made a commitment to align our resources with our educational vision.”

Note: For more background on Hillsdale, see: School Redesign Network. (2005). *Windows on Conversion case study: Hillsdale High School*. School Redesign Network at Stanford University; Bae, S. (2017). *It’s about time: Organizing schools for teacher collaboration and learning*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

Sources: Interview with Principal Jeff Gilbert; Hillsdale High School. (2022–23). *2021–2022 School Accountability Report Card*; Hillsdale High School.

Additional Resources

Redesigning for Relationships

- [How Being Part of a ‘House’ Within a School Helps Students Gain a Sense of Belonging](#), Gail Cornwall, KQED’s MindShift: This article interviews students and staff at California middle schools and high schools to explain how being part of a “house” increases belonging.
- [School Relationships](#), Greater Good in Education: This web page compiles information on practices for fostering positive peer relationships, teacher–student relationships, staff relationships, and family and community relationships.
- [XQ Design Principle: Caring, Trusting Relationships](#), Mary Ryerse, XQ: XQ is an organization that supports high school redesign. This web page provides multiple examples for how to design high schools for caring, trusting relationships, along with school profiles.

Looping

- [Classroom Looping: What It Is and Why Schools Should Consider It](#), Kelly Bielefeld, Mimio Educator: This blog post discusses the benefits of looping, a practice in which students stay with the same teacher for multiple years.
- [Looping](#), Center for Applied Research and School Improvement, University of Minnesota: This web page summarizes research on looping and provides an annotated bibliography of studies.

Advisories

- [The Advisory Guide: Designing and Implementing Effective Advisory Programs in Secondary Schools](#), Rachel A. Poliner and Carol Miller Lieber, Engaging Schools: This resource provides guidance and lesson plans to help secondary educators design and implement advisory programs that support community building and develop social and emotional awareness and skills.
- [Are Advisory Groups ‘Essential’? What They Do, How They Work](#), Kathleen Cushman, Coalition of Essential Schools: This article describes the powerful role that advisory groups can play in personalizing students’ educational experiences and improving the tone of a school; includes suggestions on organizing advisory groups.
- [Community Matters: A Facing History & Ourselves Approach to Advisory](#), Facing History & Ourselves: Built on a foundation of social and emotional learning, this advisory curriculum for grades 8–10 provides a school year’s worth of activities, materials, and best practices for establishing an inclusive community where students can engage in honest discussion and build their voices. The appendix offers tips for designing an advisory program.
- [Conflict Resolution in the High School](#), Carol Miller Lieber with Linda Lantieri and Tom Roderick, Educators for Social Responsibility: This book includes curriculum to be used in advisory that addresses conflict resolution, problem-solving, diversity and intergroup relations, social and emotional development, and building community in secondary schools.

- [Creating Advisories: A Few Notes From the Field](#), Carol Miller Lieber and Rachel A. Poliner, Coalition of Essential Schools: This article examines six potential pitfalls to be aware of and avoid when designing an advisory program.
- [East Palo Alto Academy's Advisory Handbook: A Guide to School-Wide Vertical and Horizontal Alignment](#), East Palo Alto Academy: This advisory handbook provides an example of a comprehensive advisory program and curriculum at a small high school in East Palo Alto, CA.
- [Five Tips for Teaching Advisory Classes at Your School](#), Patrick Cook-Deegan, Greater Good Magazine: This 2017 article discusses the importance of advisory periods for relationship-building as well as how to structure them into meaningful learning opportunities.
- [Middle and High School Advisory Program: Advisory Handbook](#), Stacey Neal, California State University, Northridge: This sample advisory handbook provides an outline of a secondary advisory program, information on the skills needed to be an effective advisor, and a list of more in-depth resources on advisory.
- [Planning to Implement the Townhall and Mind & Body Components](#), Center for Whole-Child Education, formerly Turnaround for Children: This toolkit outlines how a school might leverage a structure like class meetings or advisories to build developmental relationships and to cultivate students' emotional awareness.



Feature 2: Safe, Inclusive School Climate

“After 2 weeks [of community-building circles at my new school], I realized it was the first time in my life I ever wanted to be at a school! Like ‘We got circle today, I gotta go!’ I wanted to be in class, do projects, interact, be one of the first students called on. I felt good being up here!”

—Student at Ralph Bunche Academy in the Oakland Unified School District²³

What Students Need

Strong positive relationships between educators and students are necessary but not sufficient to ensure that students succeed in school. For students’ full learning potential to be unleashed, they need to be in an environment that is both physically and psychologically safe, calm, and consistent—a place where they can experience trust and belonging, so they can take risks and thrive.

Brain research helps explain why this matters so much. When we are in an environment that feels unpredictable or threatening, our brains are flooded with cortisol, which increases stress levels, reduces memory and focus, and impairs concentration. Moreover, this reaction is heightened if we’ve experienced toxic stress over time, which makes it even more difficult for our brains to focus on learning.²⁴ External stresses are exacerbated when students experience bullying or harassment on campus, creating a fight-or-flight response and further undermining learning. Good schools do not wait for such incidents to occur; they work proactively to create environments where all students feel safe and included.

Because fear and anxiety undermine cognitive capacity and short-circuit the learning process, students learn best under conditions of low threat and high support. Learning is also supported when students can connect what happens in school to their cultural contexts and experiences, when their teachers are responsive to their strengths and needs, and when their environment is “identity safe,”²⁵ reinforcing their value and belonging.²⁶ Elements of school climate contributing to student motivation and achievement include strong interpersonal relationships and communication between staff and students, as well as a sense of cohesiveness and belongingness in the school community.²⁷

Like all social groups, schools have a culture—a set of values and norms that shape the way people act. Cultural norms tell us who belongs and who does not, who is powerful and who is not, what kinds of behavior are valued and what is not acceptable. For schools to be places where everyone can learn, they must be places where everyone feels safe and included. A smaller, more personalized school community is helpful but not sufficient for students to experience a safe, inclusive climate, which also requires intentional community building and culture setting. As described under [Feature 3: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching](#), proactive efforts are also needed to create an identity-safe environment through a culturally competent approach to teaching.

Creating such an environment can require transformations of traditional school practices. (See [Table 1](#).)

Table 1. Transforming School Practices to Create an Environment of Safety and Belonging

Transforming from a school environment in which ...	Toward a school environment in which ...
Individual teacher discipline practices vary from class to class, communicating different expectations for relationships	Shared norms and values create consistency and positive experiences for students
The focus is on moving individual students through academic curriculum only	The focus is on community building as a foundation for shared social and academic work
Governance is by rules and punishments	Communities are built on shared responsibility that is explicitly taught and nurtured
Exclusionary discipline pushes students out of class and school	Restorative practices enable amends and attach students more closely to the community
Tracking systems convey differential expectations of students by race, class, language background, or disability	Heterogeneous classrooms with strong community norms and supports convey common expectations

Source: Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children (now Center for Whole-Child Education). (2021). *Design principles for schools: Putting the science of learning and development into action*.

Key Practices

Community Building

Many of us remember our first day of middle school or high school, and how intimidating it felt to walk into a big new school with so many unfamiliar faces. In addition to the structural changes described in the previous chapter, schools can combat this sense of anonymity by intentionally building community. While traditional assemblies and rallies can build a sense of common identity, they also can be alienating for students who do not feel they belong. Effective schools create spaces where students can get to know one another one-on-one and in small groups. Sometimes these are self-selected, such as student-led clubs, but it is also important to create regular opportunities for students to intentionally build community with classmates with whom they might not otherwise interact.

Creating Community. One technique used by many secondary schools—often in advisory settings as well as specific classes—is the **community circle**, or talking circle, where students arrange their chairs in a circle and each person speaks in turn, ensuring equality of voice. The main job of circle participants is to listen deeply to the speaker. Prompts can begin with “getting to know you” questions and, as the group builds trust, move to questions about values or life experiences. Circles can also be used for academic purposes, such as asking students to share how a text made them feel or their favorite method of solving a type of math problem. There are schools where all teachers are expected to use circles on a regular basis, and students themselves frequently lead them.

Schools with advisory programs use that time for many approaches to creating a caring community. (See [Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships](#).) Community circles are often a core component of advisory, where there is dedicated time for community building, but they can be used in many parts of the school. For example, at Fremont High School in Oakland, CA, circles are regularly used in advisory, after-school programs, and academic classes, as well as on occasions following traumatic incidents or losses. The school has many newcomer immigrant students, so it also offers “language circles” that are facilitated by student leaders in Vietnamese, Mam (an indigenous Central American language), Arabic, and Spanish. One Mam-speaking student from Guatemala explained, “It has been hard for me to communicate with people who speak more English or Spanish, but I have done circles in Mam. It’s a place where I can just speak my language and relate with other people who speak the same language as me.”²⁸

Developing Shared Values. In effective schools, expectations for student behavior are framed around shared values, which are rooted in the right of every student to feel safe and be included, rather than on long lists of rules and punishments. These values, which focus on respect and consideration for others, are developed and discussed in concert with students in individual subject matter classrooms as well as in settings where social-emotional skills are being developed. Students and staff work together to consider why these values matter and to develop norms around what the values look like in daily practice. This is especially important at the secondary level when adolescent students are thinking critically as they are developing their identities and sense of agency. If students are involved in developing classroom norms and everyone understands the “why” behind the norms, they seem less like bureaucratic rules and more like appropriate frameworks for keeping everyone safe. Students become advocates for the norms with one another. As the positive culture builds, everyone in the community “owns” the values and norms and incorporates them into regular speech and practice.

Some educators are hesitant to teach values or feel that their job is just to focus on academics. But it is impossible for all students to learn to their full potential if schools allow oppressive or harmful behaviors to flourish on campus. Students come from different family environments and are exposed to many different types of behavior through social media and other sources. If schools do not have active means to build a calm, inclusive, and consistent culture, hurtful behaviors, including bullying—within the school and through social media—can take hold.

Many schools reinforce common values and support social, emotional, and cognitive development with a set of explicit guidelines, sometimes called **Habits of Mind and Heart**. These guidelines describe the habits young people need to succeed in school and life, such as examining evidence, looking at an issue from multiple perspectives, using logical reasoning, making new connections, organizing and planning, managing emotions, listening to and respecting others, acting with integrity, and working for the common good. Although we may think of some of these habits as more cognitive and others as more social-emotional, research reveals that in our brains, these types of skills are interconnected—and all are correlated with academic success. Developing and using schoolwide habits or mindsets helps integrate social, emotional, and cognitive development into all classes. Teachers can use the habits as a touchstone for mini-lessons or opportunities to build collective practices among students, which helps everyone to improve on these skills together.

In Practice: Habits of Mind and Heart

Habits of Mind and Heart are essential components of assessment at East Palo Alto Academy High School, which was founded in a California community that experienced high rates of violence and poverty. The school's five Community Habits—personal responsibility, social responsibility, critical and creative thinking, application of knowledge, and communication—were used at the school's founding to develop rubrics for guidance and evaluation of every major assignment and the quarterly report card in every class, including frequent opportunities for students to self-assess.

The social, emotional, and cognitive skills, habits, and mindsets incorporated into the rubrics include personal awareness and self-management for attendance, participation, personal honesty, and care for others. They also include interaction and collaboration skills, empathy and perspective-taking, and community building. Executive functions like planning, organizing, and managing projects; metacognitive skills like reflection for self-improvement; and capacities for perseverance exhibited by willingness to revise work are also incorporated into the rubric. Some skills, such as conflict resolution and study skills, are taught in advisory classes, while all are taught, modeled, and reinforced in academic and cocurricular settings.

Because the habits are taught, modeled, and reinforced in academic and cocurricular settings across the school, students internalize them. As one student noted, "The [Five Habits] rubric has been the best thing for me over the last 4 years." In a community where two thirds of students once failed to graduate, the school has enabled 90% of students to graduate and 90% of graduates to go on to college by creating the conditions for cognitive, social, and emotional learning. This framework, which guided the development of curriculum and the evaluation of student work, was used to teach students in a consistent and persistent manner what it meant to be a student, a worker, and a member of the East Palo Alto Academy community.

A student in the school's first graduating class reflected during her senior exhibition on how the habit of social responsibility had helped her grow during high school:

It was hard for me, because freshman year I was just really a cocky individual. I thought I knew it all; I didn't want to work for anybody else, because I was big-headed. And part of this habit is how well you interact in a group. How well do you work with people who are not like you? If I put you in a group with [two other students], can you work with them? Can you get the job done? How do you move your group forward? ... Are you interrupting me every time I'm trying to speak? ... I would apply this [to the challenge of] being able to work with people who are not like you, who have different backgrounds from you, who have different viewpoints from you. Being able to tackle that in high school I think [will make it] easier for me to tackle it when I go to college.

Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Altamirano, R. P., Ramos-Beban, N., & Hylar, M. H. (2016). *Be the change: Reinventing school for student success*. Teachers College Press.

Social and Emotional Learning

Explicitly teaching **social, emotional, and cognitive skills** helps demystify the growth process for young people and allows them to cultivate agency in their own personal development. Research shows that students who participate in formal social and emotional learning programs show improvements in skills such as self-regulation, collaboration, and problem-solving, as well as attitudes about themselves and school, and academic outcomes.²⁹

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides a useful framework for understanding the multiple levels at which a school can address social and emotional learning for self- and social-awareness, self-management, social skills, and responsible decision-making, starting with the classroom and moving outward to include schoolwide culture and climate, partnerships, and aligned learning opportunities. (See [Figure 4.](#))

Figure 4. Social and Emotional Learning Framework



Source: Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning. (2020). *What is the CASEL Framework?*

Building a Growth Mindset. One goal of social and emotional learning is to help young people develop what is known as a growth mindset, based on the belief that their abilities and intelligence are not fixed but can be improved with effort, practice, and support. Brain science shows that brain development is malleable and occurs throughout life; abilities are not fixed at birth but are a function of effortful experiences that create new neuronal connections. Research has shown that when young people understand this and adopt a growth mindset, they are more likely to persist when tasks become difficult

and to perform better in school.³⁰ Building a growth mindset is especially important for students from groups that have been marginalized, because they already face negative messages about their potential. Helping students develop a growth mindset requires both culturally responsive teaching (see [Feature 3: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching](#)) and a pedagogy that enables feedback and revision with supports (see [Feature 5: Student-Centered Pedagogy](#)).

Trauma-Informed and Healing-Oriented Practices. Social and emotional learning can also help address the impact of trauma. Quite often, challenging student behaviors are a result of traumatic experiences inside or outside of school. Experiences of trauma produce dysregulated behavior—the likelihood that a student will be on edge and may either withdraw or flare easily when a small trigger occurs. Researchers now understand a great deal about how trauma disrupts brain functioning in ways that impact emotional wellness, relational trust, and academic learning. We also know that trauma occurs through specific one-time experiences but also long-term stressors such as housing insecurity; community or family violence; or ongoing bullying or discrimination, including the microaggressions that many students face in school environments. Schools can help support all students, including those who have experienced trauma, by adopting trauma-informed and healing-oriented practices³¹ that promote individual and collective wellness.

One of the easiest ways schools can be trauma informed is by having consistent **routines for checking in with students**, which provide an opportunity for sharing concerns and help reduce stress and anxiety. Predictability reduces cognitive load for everyone, allowing teachers and students to use their brains for learning. Some schools hold their advisory periods first thing in the morning so advisors can check in with students individually or through a community circle to see if there are any events or concerns that have emerged that need immediate attention. Breakfast may also be served as a morning routine, which builds community, destigmatizes free meals, and ensures that students start the day on an even keel, as hunger can also trigger distress.

Routines do not need to be complex or time-consuming. For example, some schools have a tradition in which all teachers stand at their doors and greet students as they enter the classroom, ensuring that students feel welcomed and that teachers get a pulse on their students' moods as they come into the learning space. Some teachers take attendance using a one-word check-in, during which the teacher calls each student's name and they respond with one word describing how they feel. If a student is angry or upset, the teacher is alerted to check in with them during work time and everyone knows to give them a little extra space. If a student is happy or excited, they can share a bit of their positive energy with the class. When students know teachers and advisors are concerned for their well-being, they also can communicate through journals, notes, or exit tickets as well as conversations.

Mindfulness and Wellness. One healing-oriented approach that helps students and staff deal with stress is mindfulness practice, in which students learn to focus their attention on their breathing and develop a greater sense of awareness of their own emotions and the world around them. Mindfulness practice has been shown to increase social-emotional regulation and reduce stress.³² Some schools provide a brief time for mindfulness practice in the classroom at key times during the day, such as after lunch, when students need to transition from more high-energy social situations to the focused space of the classroom. Similar benefits can come from providing opportunities for exercise, such as dance, yoga, martial arts, or sports, during the school day.

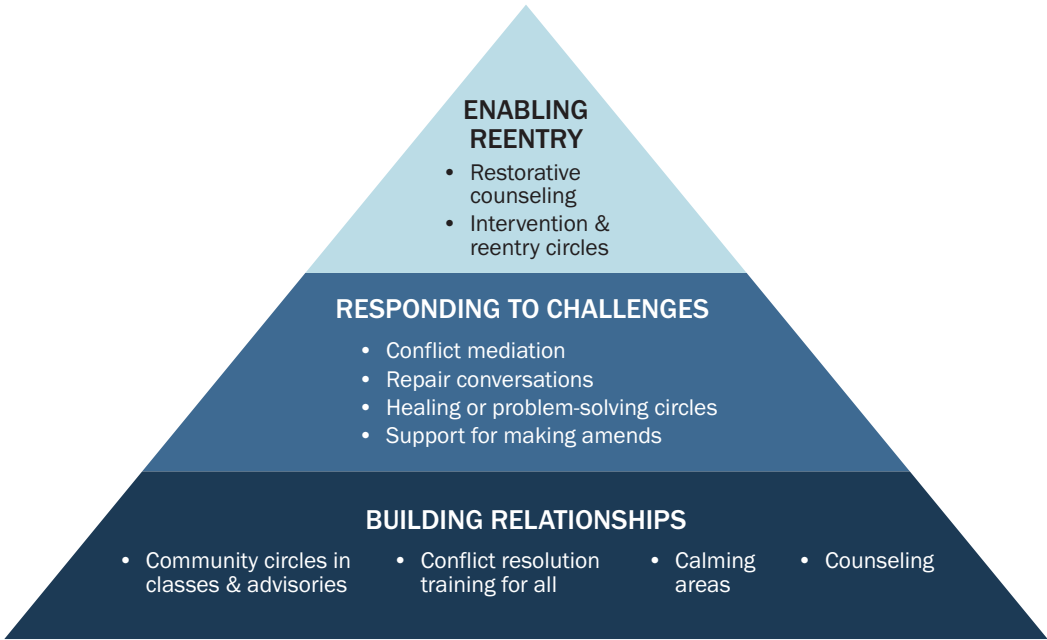
Trauma-informed schools usually have **wellness-focused spaces** on campus, where students can go to de-escalate if they are angry or distressed, to check in with a trusted adult, to request conflict mediation support, or to request more in-depth mental health services from trained clinicians. When students request these services, it is a sign that they are learning to self-regulate and taking responsibility for making the school community a safer and calmer place for everyone.

Restorative Practices

The cornerstones of a safe inclusive school climate include explicit teaching of empathy and a set of shared social-emotional skills for recognizing emotions, working with others, and resolving conflict peaceably. On occasions when norms may be violated, it is important to activate problem-solving strategies that avoid exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions, which disconnect students from school, increase alienation and dropout rates, and fail to teach strategies for conflict resolution or other solutions to challenges students may face. Research consistently finds that exclusionary discipline disproportionately affects students of color and students with disabilities, who typically experience harsher punishments for even minor offenses.³³

Restorative practices provide a more effective approach for building a positive school climate, creating greater safety, and improving student outcomes. The goal is to support students on a daily basis through community building, explicit teaching of conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, and methods that enable those who violate the norms of the community to repair harm and make amends.³⁴ (See [Figure 5.](#)) A recent large-scale study found that the more students experience these practices, the more their academic achievement and mental health improve and the less violence and misbehavior schools experience.³⁵ The gains are experienced by all students and are greatest for Black students and those with disabilities, who are most often harmed by exclusionary discipline; thus restorative practices hold promise for closing achievement gaps.

Figure 5. What Are Restorative Practices?



Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2023). *Improving student outcomes through restorative practices* [Fact sheet].

In Practice: Restorative Circles

Fremont High School in Oakland, CA, uses community circles as the foundation for the school's approach to restorative practices. There are three types of circles: (1) "Relate" circles, which help students and staff build community and practice empathy; (2) "Repair" circles, which address harm and conflict, repair relationships, and make agreements for moving forward; and (3) "Restore" circles, which welcome back students who have been suspended or are returning from juvenile detention or extended absence. Since introducing these restorative practices in 2015, Fremont High School has reduced its suspension rate by nearly half and increased its enrollment in a choice-based enrollment system, even as districtwide enrollment has fallen.

Source: Klevan, S. (2023, May 19). *Restorative justice at Fremont High School: Transforming relationships and school culture* [Blog post]. *Learning Policy Institute*.

Restorative practices begin with the understanding that relationships and community can only be *restored* if they are strong to begin with. When schools focus their resources on building a safe, inclusive community with healthy relationships among educators and students and on proactively addressing students' needs, they prevent a great deal of harmful behavior from happening in the first place. Often advisory programs are where explicit community building begins, but a strong community can be established only if it is a priority enabled by shared practices in every classroom and throughout the school.³⁶

Resolving Conflict. A common cause of disruptions in schools (as in all human social groups) is interpersonal conflict. Healthy school communities know that conflict is normal, and they plan for it by creating productive processes for dealing with disagreements, then training and supporting staff and students to use them. It is important that every member of the school community, including staff in all parts of the school as well as students, learns a shared approach to conflict resolution so that a consistent approach to resolving any kind of dispute or problem can be used.

In a restorative paradigm, when challenging student behavior occurs, staff first respond with questions that ascertain what has happened and what is going on with the involved student(s)—"What's going on?" or "Are you all right?"—rather than immediately issuing punishments. The answers to these questions help educators understand what is really at issue and often signal a need for additional resources from a counselor, social worker, or other adult.

When individuals experience a difficult dispute, a common practice is **conflict mediation**, a structured and facilitated process through which students (or staff) who have a conflict can sit down with one another, often with a trained mediator (which could be a student, teacher, or restorative practitioner), listen to one another's point of view, and work together to resolve the conflict, or at least make agreements to prevent it from escalating. In many secondary schools, conflict mediation services are entirely run by students themselves, with trained student facilitators supported by an adult mentor.

When behavior impacts not just one or two people but a larger group, such as a classroom, schools may use community circles to address the challenging issues. For example, a teacher might open a circle discussion with a check-in question and then raise a topic such as, “I’ve noticed that over the past few weeks, our class has seen a big increase in the number of side conversations that make it difficult for us to stay focused. Have you noticed the same thing? Why do you think it’s happening? What do you think would help us address this issue?” In this example, it is important to note that the teacher does not single out particular students or make assumptions about the causes of the problem, but rather frames it as a collective challenge and invites students to think together about solutions. When a school has adopted a set of community habits, these discussions can be rooted in how everyone can do a better job of adhering to the community’s common values and expectations.

Repairing Harm. In cases where it is clear that harm has been done, a restorative practices approach allows students and staff to slow down, assess what happened and what harm occurred, and develop a **plan for repairing harm and making amends**, in line with the school community’s values and expectations. The International Institute for Restorative Practices provides questions such as these that educators can use with students after a harmful incident occurs:

- What happened, and what were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what happened? How?
- What about this has been hardest for you?
- What do you think needs to happen to make things as right as possible?³⁷

These types of questions are used with everyone involved in the incident, regardless of their role. Next steps for addressing the harm, including additional support and consequences as appropriate, are planned and agreed upon by everyone involved. Students who are impacted by harm have agency over how the situation is addressed. Students who cause harm are also given a choice, within appropriate boundaries, of how they want to proceed. Often this process occurs in the format of a community circle with the impacted parties and key allies such as parents or teachers—always run by a trained facilitator to ensure that boundaries are respected and everyone is safe and supported.

It is important to note that the restorative practices approach requires a commitment of resources.³⁸ It takes less staff time to suspend a student after a behavioral incident than to design and implement a good restorative process and then follow up to ensure that students make amends. However, suspension rarely resolves the concerns, and it does not teach students how to address problems more productively in the future. Meanwhile, exclusionary discipline alienates students and increases the odds they will drop out.³⁹ If restorative practices are implemented well, the approach produces increased accountability for students, fewer suspensions, stronger feelings of safety and belonging, increased achievement, and a safer campus for everyone.⁴⁰

School Profile: Building a Community Worth Restoring at Bronxdale High School



Photo used with permission by Bronxdale High School.

[Bronxdale High School](#) is a small high school in New York City serving about 450 students in an inclusion setting, with more than 25% of students qualifying for special education services. In 2019, the student body was 57% Latino/a and 29% Black, and three fourths of the students were from low-income families. Bronxdale is one of five small schools on the campus of a previously large traditional high school that was closed in 2014. The schools offer some services jointly; for example, students from all schools can play on campuswide sports teams. Many students enter the school with a history of poor academic performance, but at Bronxdale, students now outperform city averages in graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment.

When Bronxdale first opened, it had a difficult first year, featuring substantial chaos and fighting on campus. Under the guidance of a new principal, the school introduced a new advisory structure, social and emotional learning, and restorative practices in its second year. Bronxdale is now a New York City demonstration site for restorative practices. Its faculty have a clear and intentional commitment to creating a safe, inclusive school community so their students can be good thinkers and communicators with an intrinsic desire for lifelong learning.

The school is designed for personalization, with **small class sizes** and an **advisory program** that meets several times per week. But social and emotional learning does not only happen in advisory: In every academic class at Bronxdale, students develop their own classroom norms, and teachers support students with learning relationship skills; practicing how to receive and give feedback in ways that are accountable; becoming acclimated to taking intellectual risks; and developing the capacity to drive their own learning, to assess their strengths and weaknesses, and to develop their own voice and agency. This support for student agency extends to the project-based learning strategies used in Bronxdale classes, culminating in a passion project that students choose to conduct and present in their senior year.

The **focus on social and emotional learning** is apparent throughout the school. Classrooms have “Affirmation Stations” with positive and inspiring messages, and a bulletin board displays neuroscience research from a paper students developed titled “4 Rituals That Will Make You Happy.” These include expressing gratitude, labeling negative emotions so they become less overwhelming, making “good enough” decisions to avoid the stressful sense of losing control, and sharing hugs to increase oxytocin. Many teachers integrate mindfulness practices into their classes. When students need support, they can access individual or group counseling provided by the school.

To expand empathy and understanding and to prevent bullying, students conduct research and educate each other about conditions like autism and other learning differences, and teachers are explicit about the fact that everyone learns differently, so classrooms are designed to support many modes of learning and expression.

Bronxdale has a very well-developed commitment to **restorative practices**, which only work, as PrincipalCarolyn Quintana explained, if you have something worthwhile to restore. Thus, she says, the faculty and student leaders work proactively to develop “the community, relationships, and harmony.” Then, when norms are violated, they take a restorative approach, “guided by the assumption that students’ behavior is a knowledge and capacity issue on their part rather than a character deficit.”

Like other redesigned schools, Bronxdale has reallocated resources to the classroom to allow for **reduced pupil loads** and **collaborative planning time for teachers**—but in the process of weighing trade-offs, the school decided to invest in some non-classroom staff with an explicit focus on restorative practices and social-emotional support. Bronxdale has two full-time restorative deans, as well as one counselor and two social workers. This team meets regularly to respond to incidents and coordinate all social-emotional support systems at the school. There is also daily formal and informal communication among the whole staff to prevent and respond to situations as they come up, such as separating students who are in a conflict so they can de-escalate before a fight occurs, or advisors checking in with students or calling home to communicate with family members.

A key strategy used by all adults at Bronxdale is **circles**—both proactive circles to build community and restorative circles after harm has occurred. During restorative circles, participants sit in a circle, facing one another, and through dialogue, build community and repair harm in ways that emphasize making individuals and the community that have been harmed whole and productive again. Students follow a “one mic” rule, meaning one person speaks at a time and the other participants are active listeners. The restorative deans are expert facilitators of circles and model and train others on campus.

As one of the restorative deans explains, this well-developed network of preventive and restorative approaches means Bronxdale rarely has to suspend students. He notes:

Our goal is not to have [students] leave the building unless we have to—either because of Department of Education policy or [because of] something egregious. We tell parents and kids this, and kids know. Our policy is to attempt restorative practices repeatedly before we suspend. If there is a situation between students, 99% of the time we push for mediation and a restorative conference—mediated by student leaders and guided by us or facilitated by us and, always, the advisor.

Student leadership is critical to the success of restorative practices at Bronxdale. The school has 10 trained youth peer mediators and is working to increase the number. A youth court program trains students to judge cases involving their peers and to support restorative follow-up such as apologies and community service. Eighteen seniors in a group called **Peer Group Connections** (PGC) provide mentoring to 9th-graders and facilitate circles in 9th-grade advisories to orient new students to the Bronxdale community and its expectations. As one 9th-grade participant explained, “I love PGC! I love PGC! I learned how to think about others, to not hurt others and the environment. I think about my actions more, so I don’t get into trouble.”

This self-awareness and sense of responsibility to oneself, one’s peers, and the community is the long-run outcome of restorative practices that can transform lives.

Source: Ancess, J., Rogers, B., Duncan Grand, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). *Teaching the way students learn best: Lessons from Bronxdale High School*. Learning Policy Institute.

Additional Resources

Building Community

- [10 Powerful Community-Building Ideas](#), Emelina Minero, Edutopia: This article compiles activities and includes illustrative videos for community building for elementary, middle, and high school.
- [Climate Connection Toolkit](#), Meagan O’Malley and Leslie Poynor, California Department of Education and WestEd: This toolkit includes activities that school leaders can use to encourage school community members to define, examine, and build norms that nourish a sense of belonging and stronger relationships.
- [Developing Community Agreements](#), National Equity Project: This resource provides tips for developing community agreements and an accompanying resource that walks through a suggested approach to engaging students and staff in the process.
- [Getting Classroom Management Right: Guided Discipline and Personalized Support in Secondary Schools](#), Carol Miller Lieber, Educators for Social Responsibility: This book provides resources designed for educators to organize and manage their classrooms and work with adolescents to create learning environments that foster fairness, mutual respect, accountability, and self-discipline.
- [Turnaround for Children Toolbox](#), Center for Whole-Child Education: This interactive toolkit was designed for teachers, school and district leaders, support staff, and others to reflect on and assess how to put into place whole child redesign, including cocreating norms and expectations and putting into place consistent routines.

Creating Trauma-Sensitive, Healing-Oriented Environments

- [Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools](#), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments: This web page provides resources and modules for building a trauma-informed school, and it recommends that these resources be used as part of a group-based training.

- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#), Greater Good in Education: This web page offers strategies to support teacher and student well-being, such as how trauma- and resiliency-informed schools can recognize triggers at school and be aware of signs or symptoms of distress.
- [Trauma-Informed Lesson Plans and Resources](#), American Federation of Teachers: This web page links to trauma-informed resources for teachers, with a particular emphasis on mental health resources and how to navigate traumatic current events.
- [Trauma-Informed SEL Toolkit](#), Transforming Education: This toolkit provides information about how trauma impacts students, strategies educators can implement in the classroom, secondary traumatic stress, and strategies for educator self-care. The toolkit also provides prompts to facilitate educator learning and engagement with the material.

Restorative Practices

- [Implementing Restorative Practices](#), Minnesota Department of Education: Minnesota has developed a suite of resources, including key principles to guide restorative practices in schools and implementation guidance to provide school districts, administrators, and educators with resources to integrate restorative practices into the schoolwide climate, discipline, and teaching and learning.
- [Resources on Positive School Discipline](#), American Federation of Teachers and Partners: This website compiles resources from the American Federation of Teachers and its partners to help school leaders and educators implement positive discipline strategies.
- [Restorative Justice and Practices](#), International Institute for Restorative Practices: This short reading provides an overview of restorative practices and includes the restorative questions used by the International Institute for Restorative Practices.
- [Restorative Justice Implementation Guide: A Whole School Approach](#), David Yusem, Denise Curtis, Komoia Johnson, Barbara McClung, Fania Davis, Sangita Kumar, Tanya Mayo, and Franklin Hysten, Oakland Unified School District: This guide was designed to support someone facilitating restorative practices in their school to create an implementation plan for introducing restorative practices to the school community.
- [Restorative Justice: Resources for Schools](#), Matt Davis, Edutopia: This is a compilation of resources and case studies for bringing restorative justice into schools and classrooms.
- [Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools](#), Advancement Project, American Federation of Teachers, Schott Foundation, and National Education Association: This guide provides examples of restorative practices, implementation tips and strategies, and examples from school districts.
- [Student-Led Peer Mediation](#): This website run by the Conflict Resolution Center of St. Louis offers detailed guides and scripts for high school and middle school peer mediation services.



Feature 3: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching

“There was a level of respect that [students and teachers] had for one another when they got in the room and started grappling with what would work and what wouldn’t work at our school. Everybody came away and said, ‘I have a different respect for our students’ perspective,’ or ‘I have a different respect for teachers.’”

—Former principal in the Long Beach Unified School District⁴¹

What Students Need

An important part of creating an educational community in which young people can thrive and learn is ensuring that all students feel valued and seen for who they are. In addition to designing the school for relationships and creating a physically and psychologically safe, inclusive culture, this work involves an explicit commitment to culturally responsive and sustaining teaching, which promotes respect for diversity and creates a context within which students’ experiences can be understood, appreciated, and connected to the curriculum.

This is especially true in today’s U.S. social context, where issues of identity are at the forefront of public discourse, often in ways that may communicate a message to many young people that they do not belong. Indeed, evidence suggests that intolerance is on the rise. In a 2022 survey of California high school principals, 42% indicated that incidents of intolerance on campus had increased since before the COVID-19 pandemic, and only 5% said such behavior had decreased. More than three quarters of principals (78%) reported students making hostile or demeaning remarks toward their LGBTQ classmates, 66% reported racially hostile statements toward Black students, and 50% reported racially hostile statements toward Latino/a students. At the same time, large numbers of principals reported that parents or community members had sought to challenge their schools’ efforts to teach about race and racism, to protect LGBTQ student rights, or to focus on social and emotional learning.

Students who hold one or more identities that are stigmatized in society regularly encounter messages that undermine their conception of their own ability to succeed—and they may have had those experiences in school as well. These identities may be related to race, ethnicity, language background, immigration status, family income, gender, sexual orientation, or disability, among other things. This stigmatization or discrimination can produce what is known as social identity threat, which occurs when people feel they are at risk of being treated negatively based on their identity.⁴² The pervasive sense of threat impacts the brain by creating a toxic level of stress that can create anxiety, depression, and other health problems and can undermine the learning process.⁴³

In this context, it is critical for educators to be proactive in upholding the dignity of all and for our public schools to see a core part of their purpose as educating young people to be members of a diverse democracy.⁴⁴ Effective educators proactively seek to create a school environment that is identity safe—where all students feel welcomed and included, where their identities and cultures are not a cause for exclusion but a strength to be valued and celebrated.⁴⁵

Key Practices

Counteracting Stereotype Threat

In addition to the ways that many students experience discrimination outside of school, **social identity threat** can also be triggered in schools by many factors. Within large schools, tracking systems often segregate students and allocate lower-quality curriculum and less experienced teachers to those in the bottom tracks, who are disproportionately marginalized students of color.⁴⁶ Researchers have long found that some teachers hold inaccurate characterizations of academic ability and behavior of students based on race and ethnicity,⁴⁷ have lower expectations of Black and Latino/a students, and interact with them less positively than with White students.⁴⁸ These implicit biases are associated with significant disparities in disciplinary actions, as well as lower levels of support for academic performance.⁴⁹

Young people are very observant. They note these patterns, and they internalize the perceptions that are communicated to and about them. Not only do educators need to overcome their own potential biases, but they also need to be aware of biases that exist among students. For example, at San Francisco's June Jordan School for Equity the staff held a fishbowl conversation with Black students to better understand their experiences, and one girl explained how her peers treated her as less capable, saying:

If you're African American, a lot of other students don't think that you're really educated. If I'm in class and there are four of us at the table, and I'm the only Black person, [my peers] will ask every other person at the table for help, but not me.

Uncovering this dynamic, and hearing from the student about ways some teachers had successfully interrupted it, allowed the staff to more effectively address the unconscious racism that is present throughout American society.⁵⁰

Social psychologist Claude Steele coined the term “**stereotype threat**” to describe the social identity threat that happens in education contexts when one fears being judged based on a group-based stereotype. He and his colleagues showed how it can interfere with academic performance, as anxiety interferes with working memory and focus, as well as how it can be addressed by specific actions taken in a classroom or testing situation.⁵¹ In addition to reducing practices like tracking, as the redesigned schools in this publication have done, these actions include means for creating connections to students that allow them to communicate their thoughts, experiences, and aspirations; communicating confidence in students' abilities while helping them to meet high standards of performance; and creating an open, inclusive environment in which students feel that they belong.

A growing body of research shows how educators can foster identity-safe environments that counteract societal stereotypes that may undermine students' confidence and performance. Key elements include:

- caring classroom environments in which empathy and social skills are purposefully taught and practiced, helping students learn to respect and care for one another;
- encouraging interactions between the teacher and each student that communicate affirmations of worth and competence, along with public sharing of these perceptions;

- teaching that promotes student responsibility for and belonging to the classroom community, and cooperation in learning and classroom tasks; and
- cultivating diversity as a resource for teaching through regular use of culturally diverse materials, ideas, and teaching activities, along with high expectations for all students.⁵²

Building Empathy

Practices that build empathy and common ground among students and teachers have been found to reduce bias and support the growth of positive and trustful relationships.⁵³

Tools that allow educators and students to learn what they have in common, like “**Getting to Know You**” surveys, have been shown to build empathy in relationships that, in turn, positively affect student achievement. In one

study, researchers found that both students and teachers who learned that they shared commonalities with each other indicated they held more positive relationships, and students earned higher grades when teachers learned about their similarities with students. This was particularly true for teachers’ relationships with Black and Latino/a students, closing the achievement disparities for these student groups by over 60%.⁵⁴

Practices that build empathy and common ground among students and teachers have been found to reduce bias and support the growth of positive and trustful relationships.

Empathy interviews represent another empathy-building practice that is growing in use in secondary settings. These interviews are “one-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences that help uncover unacknowledged need.”⁵⁵ They aim to support deep listening in ways that cultivate care, interest, and a sense of shared humanity between those engaged in the conversation.

The interviews are guided by a set of four to eight open-ended questions that are tailored to the purpose of the interaction and can range from surfacing challenges in schools and classrooms to surfacing insights into an individual’s lived experience. These questions are accompanied by probes like “Tell me more” or “Why” to ensure that the experiences and points of view of those participating in the interview are well articulated. Each person engaged in the empathy interview is both an interviewee and an interviewer, enabling each individual to share their perspective and to understand the point of view of the other.

While seemingly straightforward, empathy interviews often require norms, technical skills, and specific mindsets that should be understood and developed among all participants. These include allotting ample time for each person to share their thoughts without interruption or response; actively listening; and remaining aware of one’s biases, including those related to power dynamics among school actors.

In Practice: Empathy Interviews

Long Beach Unified School District has incorporated empathy interviews into its efforts to become a “relationship-centered district.” Empathy interviews have become a central practice in the district’s Learning Days, which provide opportunities for educators, leaders, and high school students to learn alongside one another and to discuss equity-focused topics. In this forum, attendees are introduced to the norms and practices of empathy interviews and, subsequently, provided an opportunity to observe them in action and to reflect on the process and its impact. A former principal who participated in empathy interviews during a Learning Day and later engaged educators and staff at her school in this activity described their power in changing perspectives:

There was a level of respect that [students and teachers] had for one another when they got in the room and started grappling with what would work and what wouldn’t work at our school. Everybody came away and said, “I have a different respect for our students’ perspective,” or “I have a different respect for teachers.”

Other Long Beach Unified practitioners also expressed that empathy interviews helped them develop deeper understandings of the issues that students faced and the ways those challenges could constrain positive relationships between students and teachers. For example, practitioners noted that students’ descriptions of unjust disciplinary practices that targeted students of color as well as a lack of diverse representation in curriculum elevated how implicit bias could shape their experiences and sense of belonging in schools. In turn, these practitioners expressed that empathy interviews helped them recognize how certain forms of harm were being inflicted on students while spurring the practitioners’ desire to collaborate with youth and staff to alleviate inequitable structures, practices, and mindsets.

Source: Hernández, L. E., & Rivero, E. (2023). *Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign*. Learning Policy Institute.

Supporting Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogy

Effective schools develop and maintain environments that explicitly embrace the identities and cultures represented by the students in their classrooms as well as in the larger society. Research on learning makes it clear that an individual’s social, emotional, and cognitive experiences are intertwined and influence learning.⁵⁶ These experiences—grounded in place, space, and the multiple communities a person interacts with (family, friends, neighborhood, places of worship, school, and others)—form the cultural contexts within which each person encounters the world. Since learning is a process of drawing connections between what we know and what we are newly discovering, these cultural contexts provide the foundation for learning and identity development. Pedagogies and practices in K–12 classrooms that center the whole child, including their cultural experiences and identities, support learning and development.

Understanding and Connecting to Cultural Contexts. Culturally responsive and sustaining practices require teachers to learn about and from students and their communities through curriculum and instruction strategies that both surface and build on that knowledge. This includes learning what students already know, in what areas they already demonstrate competence, and how that knowledge

can be leveraged for deeper learning in the classroom context. Most effective are learning spaces that are not only *relevant* and *responsive* to students' cultures, languages, experiences, and identities but also center them in ways that *affirm* and *sustain* students' cultural ways of being.⁵⁷

As educator Gloria Ladson-Billings notes, "All instruction is culturally responsive. The question is: To which culture is it currently oriented?"⁵⁸ There is a large body of research showing that effective teachers of students of color form and maintain connections with students within their social contexts. They understand that adolescents are going through a critical period of identity development. They celebrate their students as individuals and seek to learn about their cultural contexts. They ask students to share who they are and what they know with the class in a variety of ways. They regularly incorporate instructional materials that provide various viewpoints from different cultures.⁵⁹ Research shows that this approach improves students' sense of belonging and improves educational outcomes.⁶⁰

In Practice: Educators Learning From Students

Shared learning opportunities that enable adults and students to grow their knowledge, skills, and relationships together can help educators develop cultural knowledge. For example, at June Jordan School for Equity, located in San Francisco, CA, students in a leadership class used action research to analyze the experience of undocumented immigrant students at the school and make recommendations at a staff meeting. The students organized an interactive lesson for the staff, first asking them to engage in an "agree-disagree" activity around statements such as "Undocumented students feel like they can talk to adults about their situation and get help," and then presenting the results of a survey they had conducted with over half the student body, and finally leading the staff in a talking circle to reflect on the survey data and think about ways to improve the experience of undocumented students. Some staff suggested that undocumented students may actually feel more supported than the survey indicated. The student leaders pushed back respectfully but firmly, saying, "We need teachers not to be in denial, but to admit the problems—and then we can work together to solve them."

At McLane High School in Fresno, CA, students have been invited to participate in schoolwide professional development sessions, where they have engaged in shared learning around community building and restorative justice approaches. According to school administrators, opportunities like these allow teachers to hear what students at their school value and what type of positive and negative experiences are affecting their engagement and success. In addition, they noted that having students as thought partners in these professional learning settings created opportunities for staff to learn more about student identities and what was important to students' sense of belonging.

Sources: Safir, S. (2017). *The listening leader*. Jossey-Bass (pp. 166–167); Hernández, L. E., & Rivero, E. (2023). *Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign*. Learning Policy Institute.

Teachers can use their **knowledge of the community** to advance student learning and to fortify feelings of solidarity with the students they teach by sharing students' passions and affection for the community and its multiple cultures. They also can bring community elders and experts into classrooms to support and enhance student learning. (See also [Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports](#).)

Effective schools promote examples of cultural excellence not just in the classroom but across the school as well. They have active cultural clubs and host performances and presentations, often led by students or their family members, that highlight the cultural strengths of the groups that make up the school community. Students are actively encouraged to create and participate in social clubs and activities that reflect the local community's cultures, values, and traditions. Their families' participation in the school is a valued contribution that staff members pursue through persistent outreach via multilingual invitations and announcements, home visits, and social events.

Another way of leveraging cultural connections is being familiar with distinctive **traditions of excellence**—either contemporary excellence or the historical legacy of excellence that can be found in all cultures. Educator Lisa Delpit often does an exercise with audiences of teachers where she says, “I want you to think about a famous explorer, a famous writer, and a famous mathematician.” Almost everyone can give examples. Then she says, “OK, now I want you to think of a famous Chinese explorer, a famous African writer, and a famous Latin American mathematician.” The responses are usually few and far between. Delpit challenges teachers to educate themselves about these examples of excellence so they can inspire students to meet and exceed them.⁶¹ Effective teachers do not shy away from talking about the barriers that systems of oppression have created, but they also emphasize cultural strengths in the face of those barriers.

Engaging in Culturally Responsive Practices. The goal of culturally responsive practices is not only to create a sense of safety and belonging but also, as Zaretta Hammond notes, to get students “ready for rigor.” In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, Hammond identifies four key strategies for creating culturally responsive schools:

1. Helping educators become aware of how the brain learns, of culture and context, and of students' learning behaviors.
2. Developing learning partnerships between students and teachers that cultivate positive mindsets, self-efficacy, students' ownership of learning, and students' understanding of their own learning processes, while reducing stereotype threats in the classroom.
3. Creating communities of learners in a supportive learning environment that is intellectually and socially safe, collaborative, focused on learning, and restorative.
4. Supporting information processing through authentic, culturally connected tasks that build on students' experiences and offer the right amount of challenge for what students are ready to do.⁶²

Culturally responsive teachers are passionate about their content as well as about their students' learning. They use an active approach to **teaching in partnership with students**—demonstrating, modeling, explaining, writing, giving feedback, reviewing, building on students' ideas, and pushing and probing for depth of understanding. One example of this active partnership is what educator Chris Emdin calls reality

pedagogy, where students take ownership of their learning by codesigning lessons with teachers and their peers, bringing their own cultural and family strengths into the classroom. Emdin recalls a time when he was teaching a lesson on Newton’s laws of motion and he thought students would be fascinated by an imaginary scenario involving two marbles on an endless frictionless surface—but his students were confused or disinterested by this example. So, he asked two students to plan and teach a lesson on the same concept the following day. They used a scenario of someone riding on the New York City subway and asked the class to consider how forces would act on their body if someone pulled the emergency brake. The class was very engaged and understood the concepts related to Newton’s laws. Emdin then used the students’ lesson himself in a different class period, also with success.⁶³

High expectations are a key part of a set of practices used by effective teachers who are “**warm demanders**.”⁶⁴ These teachers demand a lot of their students but are warm, caring, and supportive, not punitive or permissive. Warm demanders believe in their students’ potential, and they push them with love and structured support. The warm demander teacher–student relationship is humane and equitable and is characterized by a sense of community and teamwork. Delpit gives an example of how a young high school teacher was a warm demander with Delpit’s own daughter:

Ms. Maggio “read” my daughter’s attitude of academic indifference correctly when she sat down with Maya for a long talk. Ms. Maggio finally broke through Maya’s shell of nonchalance when she said, “You just don’t think you’re very smart, do you?” Through sudden tears, my child admitted the truth of that revelation. From then on, Ms. Maggio proceeded to prove to this child that she was indeed intelligent by pushing her relentlessly to excel.⁶⁵

This is just one example of how an assets-based perspective can generate a sense of agency that is solution-oriented, whereas a negative perspective can reinforce a sense of helplessness that inhibits problem-solving. Furthermore, an assets-based approach uses students’ existing capacity to build new capacity, just as instruction that builds on students’ prior knowledge creates a base for their learning new knowledge.

In Practice: Rigorous and Culturally Responsive Practices

Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJ Humanitas) is a small neighborhood high school located in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. Serving primarily Latino/a students (96%) from low-income families (93%), the school has a 97% graduation rate, which far exceeds that of the district and state, as do its college eligibility rates (at 95%, nearly double the district rate) and achievement scores.

SJ Humanitas takes a culturally responsive approach to curriculum by centering the experiences and strengths of the Latino/a community and other marginalized groups, so students can develop a sense of identity and confidence that supports their perseverance and success. For example, 9th-graders read *Always Running*, a memoir by Luis Rodriguez about his experience in the East LA gang wars of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Students then write an essay reflecting on the relationship between the author’s perseverance and his ability to draw on cultural strengths to overcome challenges, which students can connect to their own experiences growing up in a low-income community in a different time and context. This assignment also helps students develop social-emotional skills as they analyze the author’s decisions and understand the impact of trauma on his life.

Tenth-graders learn about various social movements, such as the Farm Workers movement, LGBTQ+ rights, and the #MeToo movement, and then in groups they choose and research one of the movements and create a play based on it. This enables them to learn about social change from multiple perspectives while they hone their research and writing skills; their speaking, listening, and performance abilities; and their abilities to work in groups with their peers.

One of SJ Humanitas educators' key goals in using these culturally relevant strategies is to help students “unlearn” the negative beliefs they may have internalized about themselves and their communities. A teacher who grew up in the community herself explained that she remembered “thinking about how ‘ghetto,’ or ugly, or dirty my community was, and just thinking about all the negative aspects of my community. What we’re trying to do is ... flip that, and we’re trying to come from an assets-based understanding of our community, and what our kids bring to school, what our parents bring, and instead of focusing on all the negative things, we want to focus on the positives and how can we use those to help propel us forward.”

Source: Saunders, M., Martínez, L., Flook, L., & Hernández, L. E. (2021). *Social Justice Humanitas Academy: A community school approach to whole child education*. Learning Policy Institute.

Supporting Integration and Community. High expectations with strong supports are key to culturally responsive and sustaining practices. Tracking has been largely eliminated in redesigned high schools, although students can choose different classes based on their interests and aptitudes, especially as they reach their junior and senior years. (See [Feature 5: Student-Centered Pedagogy](#) and [Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports](#) for the adaptive pedagogies and school supports that make this possible.)

One of the major challenges facing high schools is that there is a tendency for groups to self-segregate even when schools have eliminated segregative mechanisms like tracking. All of us feel more comfortable with people who are like us, whom we already understand and identify with. When students choose different academies, career pathways, or extracurricular activities within a school, those communities can begin to become segregated, and there can be variations in resources, academic rigor, administrative attention, or other factors that lead to inequalities in the quality of education across contexts.

It is a special challenge to create democratic schools, and small learning communities within schools, that seek out diversity, in people, perspectives, ideas, and experiences, and then to work to ensure that the diversity is valued as a great source of strength. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey noted that “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living.”⁶⁶ He stressed the importance of creating circumstances in which people share a growing number of interests and participate in a growing number of associations with other groups, observing that:

In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equitable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters educate others into slaves. And the experience of each party loses in meaning, when the free interchange of varying modes of life experiences is arrested.⁶⁷

Communications that, in Dewey’s words, are “vitaly social or vitaly shared” allow people to experience the perspectives of others, and by that connection to develop understanding and appreciation for that person’s experience of the world, thus expanding their own knowledge and building a broader common ground. This is the fundamental goal of education in a democratic society, a goal that is all the more critical at this moment in our nation’s history.

School Profile: Creating Community-Connected Curriculum at Oakland High School



Photo provided by Oakland High School’s Environmental Science Academy.

By creating learning opportunities that allow students to explore issues of interest to them in school and community settings, [Oakland High School](#) in Oakland, CA, provides a curriculum that draws on young people’s experiences and knowledge. Instruction within the [Environmental Science Academy](#) pathway—one of the small learning communities within the school—is focused on developing young people’s leadership skills through a student-centered and culturally sustaining curriculum. As science teacher M Fields explained:

A lot of our curriculum is focused on student-centered problems and student-centered leadership opportunities to solve those problems. I think that’s one of the big things that makes Oakland High a community school. ... In many cases, the curriculum at Oakland High is almost written as we go, in order to address problems that are cropping up throughout the year. ... We’ll address environmental problems that crop up in our neighborhoods and in our communities.

In addition to prioritizing student-centered learning, teachers in the Environmental Science Academy pathway believe that their job is to be culturally responsive and help students understand themselves, what they care about, and how they can positively impact social issues that matter to them. At the assembly welcoming incoming students, one of the codirectors of the pathway said:

We are the Environmental Science Academy, so obviously we care about the environment. We want all of you to be environmentalists. But, more importantly, we want you to figure out what you care about. So, if you want to be an activist to end the school-to-prison pipeline or fight for racial justice or end homelessness or fight for gender equality—whatever you feel passionately about—we want to help you become an ally, advocate, and activist for that cause. So that’s one of our core missions.

To achieve their pedagogical and instructional aims, Environmental Science Academy teachers prioritize project-based learning as a pedagogical approach, which allows for collaborative engagement in learning as students explore a relevant question or problem. For example, the “lake class” taught by Fields is designed around the ecology of Lake Merritt, a short walk from Oakland High’s campus. In an activity made possible through a partnership with the Lake Merritt Boathouse, students embark on pontoon boats once per week to survey different areas of the lake for various water quality factors and collect samples for testing. Students then study the samples to determine the likely causes of water pollution and contaminants. After determining the pollution sources, students study potential policy interventions to address the health of their community lake. At the culmination of the class, students develop their own interventions to address water quality, which they present to a mock city board made up of local scientists, advocates, and other industry professionals.

One student’s final project included building a three-dimensional map that, as Fields explained, “identified that the golf course above the cemetery was a likely source of nitrogen phosphate pollution due to the amount of fertilizer that they use, and he pinpointed this by testing the tributaries that come through that area. Below the golf course is a big, open cemetery that has lot[s] of grass everywhere. ... So the student proposed a replanting plan for the cemetery that included a native plant shrub forest that could soak up and absorb the nitrates and phosphates before they got to the lake.”

The lake class demonstrates how environmental science can be made relevant and culturally responsive by focusing on the environment as the space in which students live, work, and play. The Environmental Science Academy curriculum frames the environment as not just the melting of the Arctic shelf or the extinction of rare birds but also conditions of the local ecosystem, including Lake Merritt, which is a stone’s throw from their school campus. Furthermore, even as it builds science knowledge and research and writing skills, this project-based work requires use of social-emotional skills, as students must work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and manage and track learning that is important enough to support the hard work and revision needed to achieve mastery.

Source: Klevan, S., Daniel, J., Fehrer, K., & Maier, A. (2023). *Creating the conditions for children to learn: Oakland’s districtwide community schools initiative*. Learning Policy Institute.

Additional Resources

Identity-Safe Classrooms

- [Identity Safe Classrooms](#): This website, based on a book of the same name by Dorothy M. Steele and Becki Cohn-Vargas, includes activities, practices, and resources for creating identity-safe classrooms.
- [Identity Safe Classrooms and Schools](#), Becki Cohn-Vargas, Learning for Justice: This blog post is part of a three-part series that links implicit bias, stereotype threat, and identity safety and describes practices educators can draw upon to build identity-safe classrooms and schools.
- [Not in Our School](#), Not in Our Town: This website includes lesson plans, professional development guides, and other resources to support the creation of safe, accepting, and inclusive school communities.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

- [Culturally Responsive Education Hub](#), Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative, NYC Metro Center: This hub provides practitioners with an array of resources to advance culturally responsive education and ethnic studies. These include research studies and briefs; resources for culturally responsive education during remote learning; and a video series that illustrates the impact of culturally responsive education from the perspective of parents, educators, and students.
- [Culturally Responsive Teaching](#), Edutopia: This web page provides practitioners with links to articles, resources, and videos that support culturally responsive teaching. The resources cover various topics, including broader discussions of how to advance equity and anti-racism in classrooms at different grade levels as well as guidance on how to adopt and implement a range of discrete culturally responsive teaching practices.
- [Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain](#), Zaretta Hammond: This website for the book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* also has links to blog posts and videos about designing and implementing culturally responsive instruction consistent with research on brain development and neuroscience.
- [Portrait of a Culturally Responsive School](#), The Leadership Academy: This resource offers guidance for school leaders and their teams to develop practices, policies, and structures that support the academic, social, and emotional success of youth of every race, language, or other identity backgrounds. Through its eight action areas of culturally responsive leadership, the guide supports practitioners in disrupting systemic oppression and decentering dominant cultures to accelerate learning and well-being
- [Warm Demander](#), Kathleen Cushman: This short video shares the voices of four teachers talking about what being a “warm demander” means to them.
- [The Warm Demander: An Equity Approach](#), Matt Alexander, Edutopia: This blog post describes the warm demander framework developed at June Jordan School for Equity.



Feature 4: Deeper Learning Curriculum

“You get to create 3D models, do research, and exhibitions. You do projects. You come up with your own topics and problems. You create the questions and answer them. You write theme, plot, and character essays. You do visuals. [The teachers] don’t want it to be boring for you.”

—Student at Vanguard High School⁶⁸

What Students Need

As factory-model schools were designed, the curriculum was intended to cover a body of content—differentiated by track—transmitted to students largely for recall and reproduction. Guided by textbooks, it has often consisted of disconnected facts that are not deeply explored. Pacing guides assume that students all learn at the same rate, by absorbing information in the same way. Standardized tests often reinforce this approach by encouraging coverage of vast amounts of material and using superficial multiple-choice questions to assess students. Rather than feeling like drivers of their own learning, students understand that what is expected of them each day is to follow the teachers’ directions and complete a required set of tasks that may not be challenging, meaningful, or interesting to them. This factory-model approach is a major reason students say they disengage or drop out.⁶⁹

We know from research in the learning sciences that students learn at different paces and in different ways that build on their prior experiences and connect to their interests, modes of processing and expression, and cultural contexts. Further, the most powerful mode of learning for human beings is generated by meaningful inquiry that awakens the brain to search for answers.⁷⁰ An inquiry-oriented curriculum aimed at transferable learning—that is, learning that can be tapped and used in other settings—engages students and challenges them to understand concepts deeply, find and integrate information, assemble evidence, weigh ideas, and develop skills of analysis and expression.

Even well-intentioned efforts to ensure that all students learn to high standards can miss the most important part of the equation: the students themselves and their ability to make meaning of information, experience, and the world they live in so that they can use knowledge for their own purposes. Especially at the secondary level, students come to school with a wealth of knowledge, skills, habits, and views about the world and their role in it. As educator Deborah Meier explains, a good school should offer “a rich and interesting curriculum full of powerful ideas and experiences aimed at inspiring its students with the desire to know more, a curriculum that sustains students’ natural drive to make sense of the world and trusts in their capacity to have an impact upon it.”⁷¹

Key Practices

Learning Through Inquiry

Schools that motivate and succeed with diverse learners do not focus on getting through the textbook or touching topics superficially. They demand intellectually challenging work, and they are focused on preparing all students to meet the skill and content demands of college and careers—what is now known as deeper learning. Curriculum focuses not just on content expertise but on other essential competencies

as well, including critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration, effective communication, self-directed learning, and academic mindsets. (See [Table 2.](#)) In schools that enable students to learn deeply, students are typically asked to engage in inquiry in all classes, applying their learning to novel problems and tasks and producing significant pieces of analytic work, including research papers, projects, models, and designs.

Bob Moses, founder of the Algebra Project, used to say that in traditional classrooms, students often seem like spectators, watching the teacher perform. It should be the other way around, he said, with the students “on the field playing the game,” and the teacher acting as a coach.⁷² In inquiry-based teaching, lessons are often structured around essential questions that get to the heart of an issue and allow in-depth exploration. For example, a history class might approach a unit featuring student research on the European “discovery” of the Americas using a question such as, “How should we remember Christopher Columbus today?” Within individual lessons, teachers or students themselves can facilitate inquiry-based discussions during which students listen deeply to one another’s points of view, explore evidence, and agree or disagree with their peers’ analysis. Inquiry can also involve longer-term research projects in which, rather than just reporting information, students ask questions, consider alternatives, conduct analysis, and apply their knowledge.

Table 2. Transforming Schools to Advance Deeper Learning

Transforming from a school with ...	Toward a school with ...
Transmission teaching of disconnected facts	Inquiry into meaningful problems that connect areas of learning
A focus on memorization of facts and formulas	A focus on exhibitions of deeper learning
Standardized materials, pacing, and modes of learning	Multiple pathways for learning and demonstrating knowledge
A view that students are motivated—or not	An understanding that students are motivated by engaging tasks that are well supported
A focus on individual work; consulting with others is “cheating”	A focus on collaborative work; consulting with others is a major resource for learning
Curricula and instruction rooted in a canonical view of the dominant culture	Curricula and instruction that are culturally responsive, building on students’ experiences
Tracking, based on the view that ability is fixed and requires differential curriculum	Heterogeneous grouping, based on the understanding that ability is developed in rich learning environments

Source: Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children (now Center for Whole-Child Education). (2021). *Design principles for schools: Putting the science of learning and development into action.*

In inquiry-based classrooms, students are engaged in activities aimed at the mastery of facts as well as in-depth understanding. A student from Vanguard High School (a member school of the New York Performance Standards Consortium) explains how this impacts students:

You get to create 3D models, do research, and exhibitions. You do projects. You come up with your own topics and problems. You create the questions and answer them. You write theme, plot, and character essays. You do visuals. [The teachers] don't want it to be boring for you.⁷³

A student from another school explained how his humanities teacher took an inquiry-based approach by asking her students real questions and taking their answers seriously:

Some other teachers, when they ask a question, you know they're looking for a certain answer. But when Amina asked a question, she was asking us a real question. She wouldn't directly contradict students' ideas, or gloss over them and move on if she thought they were not the right answer. She would try and build on them and try to get students to think critically about them and let students come to their own conclusions.⁷⁴

Project-Based Learning

One form of inquiry-based teaching links curriculum topics to real-world issues through project-based learning, in which students are engaged in challenging tasks that usually involve knowledge and skills from more than one academic discipline. Many classes require students to do investigations that entail critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication. Students must engage in sustained inquiry, make choices about questions to explore, get critiques and make revisions, and present a real-world product to an authentic audience, including written documentation and, often, an oral presentation and defense.⁷⁵ These tasks, which are key components of a performance assessment system, allow students to show that they have met high standards. (For more on performance assessment, see [Feature 6: Authentic Assessment](#).)

A teacher at Vanguard High School in New York City explains how he prepares his students, most of whom come from low-income households, to engage in rigorous project-based learning of the sort that many students do not encounter until after high school:

I use in-depth approaches and assign college-level research projects. For 2 months, each morning, we teach students research skills and essay skills so that they can do a minimum 20-page research paper in history. They choose the topic. We develop their topic together. We develop an angle to the topic. I take them to the Donnell Library. First, I call the librarian and she gets books on their topics together. They browse through different books, take notes, and order their thoughts in an outline. Then, the kids have to listen to their teachers and peers criticizing their work. Then they have to rewrite. They have to cite references, show evidence, and prove their thesis.⁷⁶

Project-based learning develops a wide range of language and collaboration skills, along with content knowledge. For this reason, it is used as a primary mode of instruction in the Internationals Network for Public Schools of more than 30 public secondary schools serving recent immigrant students from more than 100 countries in New York and New Jersey, the San Francisco Bay Area, and the Washington, DC, metro area. (See [“In Practice: Project-Based Learning.”](#))

In Practice: Project-Based Learning

In contrast to the traditional method of teaching immigrant students in separate English as a Second Language (ESL) classes using an English-only approach, the [Internationals Network](#) school model emphasizes multilingualism, integrating English language development across academic content, and rigorous academics using project-based learning that locates the curriculum in real-world situations. These successful schools have a track record of enabling students who begin 9th grade with little or no knowledge of English to graduate and go on to college at very high rates.

At San Francisco International High School, for example, a 9th- and 10th-grade Biology class was focused on the question, “Should soda have a tax?” The teacher provided the question in English and five other languages so newly arrived students could immediately understand it, and students were encouraged to use Google Translate or consult with peers in their native language as needed. Students also had access to visuals accompanying research articles and other English-language documents to use in the inquiry process.

Students worked in pairs or small groups during many parts of the lesson, allowing more experienced students to mentor and model for less experienced students. Students learned key academic vocabulary (e.g., “glucose”) and used the terms to construct English sentences that developed their language skills (e.g., “When you don’t eat, the glucose decreases because your body uses the energy.”) There also were frequent opportunities for students to develop their oral English language skills through informal and formal dialogue with peers in which the only common language was English. For example, students were asked to share with their small group on the questions: “What did other people write? What did it make you think?” Throughout the lesson, the teacher circulated through the room, reinforcing routines and expectations for participation, and talking one-on-one with students to ensure they were getting the support they needed and were accessing scaffolding like sentence starters on the classroom wall.

This lesson eventually led to students writing persuasive essays in English about whether soda should be taxed. Over the course of a few weeks, students learned the science of how sugary drinks impact the human body, while also engaging with real-world issues around public health, individual choice, and taxation. In addition to developing their oral and written English skills, students analyzed a topic, crafted a thesis, selected evidence, and organized an argument.

A project around a question such as “Should soda have a tax?” can be accessed at nearly any skill level. For newcomer students with little or no English language, the emphasis might be on developing oral communication skills through peer interactions, accessing the science content primarily through their native language, and then writing a short essay in English with scaffolded sentence starters. A student who has developed academic English skills, on the other hand, might produce a research paper analyzing the science and social science issues raised by the topic. In addition to being an entry point to the academic content of biology, the question is inquiry-based, connected to a real-world issue that matters to government officials and the public, and relevant to the life experience of teenagers in the United States who have easy access to soda.

Source: Roc, M., Ross, P., & Hernández, L. E. (2019). *Internationals Network for Public Schools: A deeper learning approach to supporting English learners*. Learning Policy Institute.

There is evidence that this kind of teaching can change student outcomes.⁷⁷ For example, a study of more than 2,000 students in 23 restructured schools, most of them in urban areas, found much higher levels of achievement on complex performance tasks for students who experienced what these researchers termed “authentic pedagogy”—instruction focused on active learning in real-world contexts calling for higher-order thinking, consideration of alternatives, extended writing, and an audience for student work.⁷⁸ An analysis of national data found that students in restructured schools where “authentic instruction” was widespread experienced greater achievement gains on conventional tests.⁷⁹

Recent studies found that middle schoolers, including English learners, who participated in rigorous project-based learning in science outperformed their peers, and that high schoolers in Advanced Placement classes with project-based components did better on AP exams.⁸⁰ As a result of these studies, the College Board is adding [project-based components](#) to many of its courses and using them as part of the assessment process.

Schools can demand rigorous intellectual work from students only if they are willing to forgo the goal of superficial content coverage. Successful schools follow the Coalition of Essential Schools’ guiding principle of “less is more,” carefully choosing what to focus on so students gain in-depth understanding rather than simply exposure to large quantities of information that may be poorly understood.⁸¹ In-depth study does not imply haphazard selection of a few interesting ideas to focus on. Instead, topics are judiciously selected to provide a framework for many related key ideas, so students come away with an understanding of the core concepts and modes of inquiry in the academic disciplines they are studying.

In effective schools that create a high-leverage and highly supported learning experience, “less is more” applies not only to curricular choices but also to the overall school program. The traditional high school often takes a “shopping mall” approach,⁸² offering many electives for students to choose without guaranteeing they will graduate with serious mastery of essential skills for college, career, and life. Effective schools make deliberate choices about what is most essential and do those important things well for all students. They also supplement their own core offerings with out-of-school experiences such as community service, internships, online courses, and courses at local colleges. These programs, which require partnerships with community-based organizations and other agencies, allow secondary schools to provide choices and give students the opportunity to understand the world in which they are growing up.

Linked Learning

Powerful learning is about making connections between what we already know and what we want to learn, between and among ideas and people, and between schoolwork and real-life contexts and goals. To make a rigorous deeper learning curriculum effective, teachers make strong efforts to link the curriculum to students’ own lives and interests, their communities, and their goals for the future.

Linking Curriculum to Students’ Experiences. Connecting curriculum to students’ experiences does not imply that the content is watered down or confined to the students’ own immediate concerns. Instead, assignments are designed to link students’ experiences to the demands of a liberal arts curriculum that blends classical studies with contemporary and multicultural elements to which students can relate. For example, students compare works by Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov to pieces by Gabriel

García Márquez and Toni Morrison. Sonia Sanchez sits alongside William Shakespeare. The study of constitutional rights is linked to issues students understand. As a teacher at Manhattan Village Academy, a high school in New York City, describes:

We try to relate historical issues to the present day. We connected Fourth Amendment rights to locker searches when a book bag was stolen. We discuss individual responsibility and what you want the government to take over. We discuss and debate to push them to develop their thoughts.

Similarly, calculations used on the basketball court can provide a foundation for certain math concepts if teachers are alert to support the transfer by building on this kind of real-world knowledge. Educators might also illustrate symbolic meanings in literature by beginning with rap lyrics and texts the students know and carrying their insights into study of more formal canonic texts.⁸³

Linking curriculum to students also means knowing them well enough to understand their preconceptions about the concepts being studied, in some instances building on them and in others explicitly challenging them. There is a classic example among science teachers trying to teach students about the phases of the moon. Many people have a misconception that the moon's phases are caused by the Earth casting a shadow over the surface of the moon. If this misconception is not explicitly unpacked by showing more accurate models to provoke a new understanding, students may sit through an engaging lesson about the phases of the moon and emerge still not knowing that the moon's phases are actually caused by its positioning relative to the Earth and the sun.⁸⁴ Good teachers understand that new learning sometimes requires taking the time to unlearn old ways of looking at the world.

Linking Learning to the Real World. Other linkages to the real world and to students' interests are forged through **community service and internships**. These opportunities not only extend the curriculum and make it more authentic, but they also allow young people to become responsible, linking the experiences to their futures. Knowing that adolescents want and need to become more self-directed, it is important that schools not infantilize adolescents by treating them as if they need to be constantly monitored and controlled. Effective schools give young people progressively more responsibility so they can grow and take ownership of their own learning. As they are responsible for the welfare of others, they develop pride and confidence in themselves and greater maturity in their perspectives about others. Community service activities and internships allow students to explore their interests and future career goals, contribute to the lives of others, and learn how to engage the world outside of home and school. This real-world work, which is typically accompanied by seminars and reflective assignments that help students process what they are learning, is part of the authentic curriculum experience.

Dual enrollment, another effective way to link students to their futures, establishes connections with local community colleges that allow students to enroll in selected courses or even an entire course of study that prepares them for a vocational credential or a start on a particular major. These experiences enable students to gain insight into the demands of college study and help them prepare for it. Rather than teachers saying, "You'll need this when you get to college," students experience what they need firsthand, which can help them develop commitment to the learning process. Moreover, students who complete dual enrollment courses get college credit that is usually transferable, eliminating the need

to take expensive Advanced Placement exams in the hope of gaining college units. Studies have shown that dual enrollment participation is positively related to college enrollment and persistence and higher college GPAs.⁸⁵

All these features are part of the design of **Linked Learning academies**, which restructure high schools by connecting them to communities, career pathways, and college opportunities while personalizing the learning environment. The Linked Learning approach, which has launched more than 600 industry-themed pathways that prepare students for both college and careers, began in California and has spread to more than 20 states. It challenges a major source of historic high school segregation: the design of two very separate tracks—college prep and vocational education—differentiated by perceived academic ability as well as race and class. In a world where knowledge explosion and rapid technological change mean that the vast majority of jobs require some postsecondary education and where young people are predicted to change jobs at least 10 times in their lives, neither of these tracks provides students with all the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in today’s world. Linked Learning pathways reject this false choice by bringing together college and career preparation through:

- small learning communities that are personalized through advisement systems and curriculum design;
- rigorous academics that are aligned to admissions requirements for state colleges and universities and designed around authentic curriculum with real-world applications and performance assessments that show what students can do in applying their learning;
- industry partnerships in fields ranging from health professions to law and social justice to aviation to STEM to teaching and the arts that coconstruct career learning opportunities, making both academic and career courses more relevant by applying knowledge and skills to these contexts;
- work-based learning, providing students with exposure to workplaces through job shadowing, apprenticeships, internships, and more; and
- comprehensive support services, including counseling and supplemental instruction in reading, writing, and math, to address individual needs.⁸⁶

Students of all incomes and prior achievement levels in Linked Learning academies have lower dropout rates, higher graduation rates, and higher college-going rates than students in traditional schools.⁸⁷ These schools are successful because they support deeper learning in personalized settings that support equitable opportunities and outcomes, enabling students to connect to their futures.

School Profile: Connecting Students to Their Futures at Life Academy



Photo by Rodrigo Sandoval-Perez.

A major strategy for creating personalized small learning communities in California has been the set of **Linked Learning pathways** offering college and career preparation in high-demand industries, partnering with industry and community organizations. More than 600 pathways have been created since 2001, either as small learning communities in large high schools or as small schools. The academies support students with highly engaging applied learning, advisory programs, access for all to college preparatory coursework, and community-based internships as well as supports.

[Life Academy of Health and Bioscience](#) in Oakland, CA, serves 446 students in grades 6–12 in Oakland Unified School District, 99% of whom are students of color, 96% of whom are from low-income families, and 30% of whom are English learners. Opened in the fall of 2001, the health professions academy was designed based on research about effective small learning communities, and it was originally housed within a large comprehensive high school. Most of Oakland’s high schools—large and small—offer **Linked Learning academies**, and all of them are also community schools that offer a full suite of health care, social services, and expanded learning opportunities to their students (see [Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports](#)).

Life Academy’s mission is to dramatically interrupt patterns of injustice and inequity for underserved communities in Oakland. Through transformative learning experiences focused on health, medicine, and bioscience, students are engaged in inquiry-based learning and inspired to acquire the skills,

knowledge, and habits necessary to succeed in college and careers in the medical field. These skills are developed in part through the school's multiple performance-based exhibitions, which include an interdisciplinary and scholarly senior exhibition, and a wide array of student interest-driven post-session classes at the end of the year.

All students select one of the school's three career pathways—medicine, health, or biotechnology—and take courses and complete an internship aligned with that pathway. To support these internships, the school has developed deep relationships with industry partners including Oakland Children's Hospital, Youth Bridge (Alta Bates and Summit hospitals), and Highland Hospital. Besides the internships, hallmark instructional elements of the school include an emphasis on personalization, cross-disciplinary projects, public demonstration of mastery, a college preparatory curriculum, and productive group work.

The culminating work for students is the **senior research paper**—a yearlong, multistage assignment. Each student researches a question that emerges out of an internship experience. To answer the question, each student conducts a literature review; interviews an expert; writes a paper; and presents and defends findings to a panel that includes an advisor, students, and family or community members.

The school had a 91% graduation rate in 2021–22, and 96% of its students had completed the coursework for state university admissions, well above district and state averages. The school has typically placed 100% of its students in 2- or 4-year colleges. It has had the highest University of California and California State University acceptance rates of any high school in Oakland, with students going to schools such as UC Berkeley and UCLA, as well as Stanford, University of San Francisco, and Smith College.

When asked what high school experiences have contributed to their college readiness, more than 90% of Life Academy students list relationships with teachers and advisors. More than 90% also list features of their deeper learning experiences, including workplace internships, opportunities to explain their thinking, testing or trying out ideas to see if they work, evaluating themselves on their classwork, participating in peer review of their work, and having to revise their work until it meets standards of proficiency.

These practices are part of a performance-based, mastery-oriented, relationship-supported approach to learning that can create success for all students. Life Academy's focus on students drives every decision: what and how to teach authentically, what structures will equip students and teachers to know and believe in each other, and how to bring out the best in the students and their community.

Sources: California Department of Education. [Student Accountability Report Card, 2021–22](#); Darling-Hammond, L., Friedlaender, D., & Snyder, J. (2014). *Student-centered schools: Policy supports for closing the opportunity gap*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education; Richardson, N., & Feldman, J. (2014). *Student-centered learning: Life Academy of Health and Bioscience*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education; Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. (2014). *Student-centered learning: How four schools are closing the opportunity gap*. Printed with permission.

Additional Resources

Inquiry-Based Learning

- [Center for Inquiry in Teaching and Learning](#), New York Performance Standards Consortium: The Center provides professional development for schools in the Consortium, offering a wide range of workshops and events that nurture professionalism and collaboration. It also offers mentorship, training, and resources to other school systems and groups interested in inquiry-based teaching and performance assessment.
- [PBLWorks](#), Buck Institute for Education: This website provides K–12 educators with resources to design and facilitate high-quality project-based learning. Resources for practitioners to download include project ideas and sample planning forms, rubrics, student handouts, and more.
- [Project-Based Learning series](#), Edutopia: This series of articles and videos describes how project-based learning can have a positive impact on achievement and engagement. It provides an overview of the key features of project-based learning, the skills and mindsets that it nurtures and requires, and the ways it fits in with many curricular areas.
- [Resources and Downloads to Facilitate Inquiry-Based Learning](#), Edutopia: This web page helps educators find information, strategies, and tools to promote engagement in inquiry-based learning. It includes downloadable tools and resources used by practitioners at schools with successful inquiry-based practices to help educators see these practices and strategies in action.
- [Share My Lesson](#), American Federation of Teachers: This website provides a wide variety of project-based learning lessons developed by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) members in collaboration with AFT staff. Resources for practitioners to download include many ideas for project-based learning across subjects areas.
- [Youcubed](#), Stanford Graduate School of Education: This website provides educators with resources to teach math in creative and inquiry-based ways that make it powerful and accessible for all learners. Resources include tasks by grade and topic, a list of key research, and online courses for educators and students.

School Models Focused on Deeper Learning

- [All Learners All the Time: Project-Based Learning and Equity in the Internationals Network](#): This learning brief provides examples of project-based learning through the Internationals Network as well as information about how project-based learning can be effective for multilingual learners.
- [Big Picture Learning](#): Big Picture Learning works with districts and school leaders to design schools that immerse students in interest-based learning experiences. These learning experiences are grounded in personalized courses of study and workplace learning opportunities that are supported with advisories, among other personalized structures, that strengthen relationships.

- **High Tech High:** High Tech High is a charter school network that services over 6,000 students in grades K–12. Network schools maintain a learner-centered model that immerses students in project-based learning and supports students through structures that foster trusting and caring relationships. The High Tech High organization also has a Teacher Credentialing Program and the High Tech High Graduate School of Education, offering professional development opportunities serving national and international educators.
- **Linked Learning Alliance:** The goal of this website is to connect all youth to college, career, and purpose by supporting educators, employers, and communities to establish accelerated, seamless learning experiences that lead to meaningful credentials and careers. Their website includes a resource library.
- **New Tech Network:** New Tech Network partners with school districts to support comprehensive school change centered on the implementation of interdisciplinary, project-based learning. To do this, the network engages district officials and practitioners in professional development that helps them build schools that implement project-based learning and consider how to spread this deeper learning model to other schools through a supportive policy and personnel infrastructure.



Feature 5: Student-Centered Pedagogy

“We talk about strengths and challenges: ‘Every student has those. What are those for you?’ [Students] get so used to everybody needing something different to be successful that it doesn’t necessarily faze them.”

—Teacher from Gateway Public Schools⁸⁸

What Students Need

Just as an effective secondary school curriculum must take into account the needs and interests of students themselves, so too the pedagogy—how the curriculum is taught—must be personalized and student-centered. The factory-model school assumes that all students learn in the same way, and if they do not, then they ought to be separated into different classrooms or tracks to be taught different material, which usually results in marginalized students receiving a lower-quality curriculum from less experienced teachers without a greater benefit to students with stronger academic skills.⁸⁹

Student-centered pedagogy begins with structures that allow teachers to know students and their learning strategies well; takes place in a safe, inclusive school and classroom culture; values students’ identities and cultures; and enacts an authentic curriculum that is meaningful to students. All of these elements help create the essential conditions for a young person to learn. A student-centered pedagogy goes one step further and recognizes that each student is a unique individual who learns in their own way and who needs individualized support to meet their full potential.

Key Practices

Multiple Pathways to Learning

The more we know about how people learn, the more we understand that teaching must account for individual differences. While there are some common aspects of the developmental process, every human brain is different and develops in its own way.⁹⁰ Students have different pathways and approaches to learning that enable them to process information and to make sense of their experiences. One out of every eight American children is identified as having “learning disabilities”—not because huge numbers of our young people are unable to function, but because they, like many other students who are not so labeled, have distinct learning needs.⁹¹ We now understand that the traditional classroom, with a teacher in the front of the room lecturing to rows of students, is ineffective if it is the only pathway to learning. Successful schools adjust their teaching modes to meet students where they are.

Students have different pathways and approaches to learning that enable them to process information and to make sense of their experiences.

Psychologist Robert Glaser calls this kind of teaching an adaptive pedagogy. He argues that 21st-century schools must shift from a selective mode—“characterized by minimal variation in the conditions for learning” in which “a narrow range of instructional options and a limited number of ways to succeed are available”—to an adaptive mode in which “the educational environment can provide for a range of opportunities for success. Modes of teaching are adjusted to individuals—their backgrounds, talents, interests, and the nature of past performance.”⁹²

Universal Design for Learning

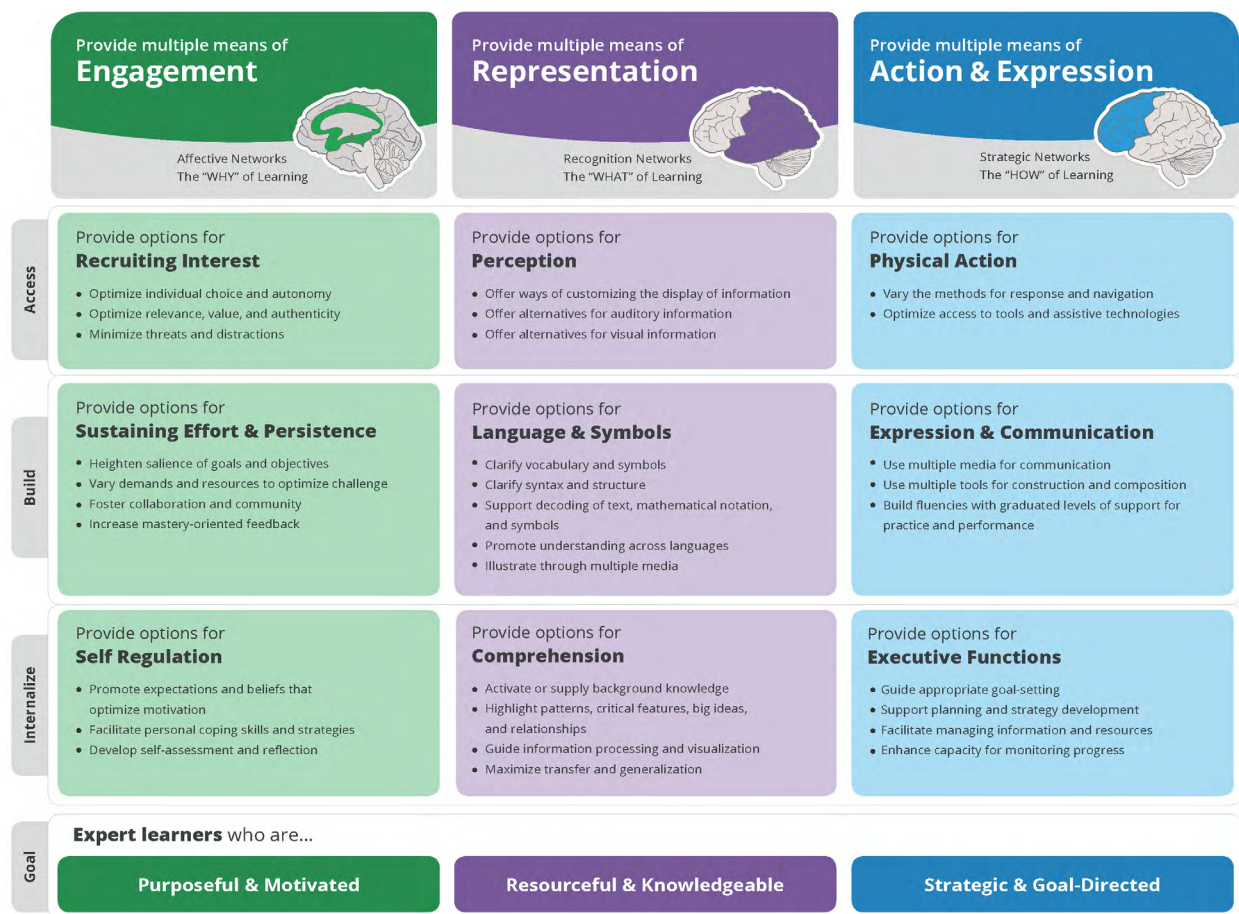
Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for designing pedagogy based on this scientific understanding of how people learn. (See [Figure 6](#).) To create a learning environment in which all students can access meaningful learning, teachers start by considering different modes of engagement. How will the teacher motivate student interest, sustain student engagement, and facilitate productive strategies and self-assessment that enable self-regulation? What are the options that will support students to engage? Then teachers can offer multiple paths of representation, so students can understand new information, improve their language skills, and construct meaning and generate new understandings. And finally, teachers provide a range of opportunities for student action and expression, including physical actions using tools and different response methods; communication options; and supports for executive functions such as goal setting, planning, information processing, and monitoring progress. In each of these areas, teachers must offer multiple means for students to engage so that young people with different backgrounds, experiences, and histories with school can all access the curriculum.⁹³

In the classroom, these approaches offer **multiple instructional strategies** that support active learning and give students different entry points to learning, allowing them to use what psychologist Howard Gardner calls their “multiple intelligences.”⁹⁴ Teachers use diverse strategies ranging from whole class lecture and recitation to guided inquiry, small group work, discussions, independent work, projects, experiments, book and internet research, constructions of models and products, use of technology, and the arts for accessing and expressing ideas. This gives students multiple ways to hook into the content and understand the concepts being taught.

Teachers also use **multiple representations of ideas** that are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic; identify leveled texts and e-books that can adjust fonts and input modalities; and allow students to express their ideas in a variety of ways. These and other approaches allow greater access for students with identified learning differences and for English learners in mainstream classroom settings, and they also help all students learn more effectively.

In a student-centered pedagogy, teachers not only use multiple approaches, but they also help students understand which learning approaches work best for them. When students develop metacognition, or an understanding of their own thought processes and how their brain best operates, they can take ownership of their own learning, making adjustments and advocating for what they need to succeed. A teacher with Gateway Public Schools in San Francisco—a school initially launched for students identified with disabilities—explains, “We talk about strengths and challenges. ‘Every student has those, what are those for you?’” Then, she says, students “get so used to everybody needing something different to be successful that it doesn’t necessarily faze them.”⁹⁵

Figure 6. Universal Design for Learning Framework



Source: CAST. (2018). *Universal Design for Learning guidelines version 2.2* [Graphic organizer].

Additional Classroom Supports

Traditional secondary schools often assume that the only way to support students with different needs or skill levels is to separate them into different tracks. Unlike grouping for instruction that occurs for specific purposes and changes as needed, tracking predetermines learning opportunities for many years, including students' options after high school. It is very difficult to create an identity-safe, inclusive school climate when the course schedule itself separates students into "higher" and "lower" achievers. Students in lower tracks understand these nuances and get the message quite clearly that they are not expected to achieve at high levels. Effective schools ensure that as many courses as possible have a heterogeneous mix of students and provide rigorous coursework to everyone, along with extra support for students who need it.

Intentionally inclusive schools like [Bronxdale High School](#)⁹⁶ in New York City and [Gateway Public Schools](#)⁹⁷ illustrate how to provide access to a rigorous project-based curriculum to a wide range of students of varying initial achievement levels, including those with identified learning disabilities, without segregation or tracking. In addition to the strategies previously identified, they often use **coteaching**, where there are two teachers in inclusion classrooms, one trained in special education, to plan curriculum jointly and support the wide-ranging needs of learners.

The Internationals Network for Public Schools⁹⁸ illustrates how to provide in-class supports for English learners at the secondary level. This group of 27 schools serves newcomers who have not yet learned English in rigorous college preparatory pathways by integrating language development into every content-area course, so students engage with academics while learning English and also maintaining and developing their native language skills. Multilingualism is viewed as an asset rather than a barrier to engaging with challenging curriculum. Teachers in Internationals schools plan together and use many of the curricular and instructional strategies described in this publication: project-based curriculum rooted in collaboration and multiple forms of engagement, representation, and expression (including the use of tools like Google Translate). They accomplish this with specialized teaching in the core classroom, rather than in a tracking system that reduces access to challenging content. Their work has shown that when adolescent English learner students are supported effectively, they do well in high school and are well prepared for college and careers. (See “[In Practice: Project-Based Learning](#)” in [Feature 4: Deeper Learning Curriculum](#).)

Supports Beyond the Classroom

High-Quality, High-Intensity Tutoring. One of the most useful and equity-enhancing interventions on top of good teaching is high-quality, high-intensity tutoring. Studies have shown that when done well, high-intensity tutoring can produce significant gains in student skill level, catching students up and allowing them to move ahead in a matter of weeks rather than years.⁹⁹ Effective tutoring cannot be accomplished by a rotating group of untrained volunteers, or by infrequent or inconsistent sessions. Effective tutors can include credentialed teachers, paraprofessionals, or knowledgeable volunteers who have received significant training. Studies suggest that effective programs organize tutors to work with students at least three times per week for 30 minutes or more, in groups of five or fewer.¹⁰⁰ When tutoring is aligned with what is happening in the classroom, students can apply their new skills and experience success that builds on itself.

Successful secondary schools often make time for tutoring opportunities in extra “lab” or support periods available to all students—sometimes attached to specific courses, such as Algebra or Physics, and sometimes as part of a resource room open regularly to all. They may also arrange for after-school tutoring or support time, Saturday school options, or online tutoring options from trained volunteers, teachers, paraprofessionals, or more advanced students.

Blended Learning. As difficult as the COVID-19 pandemic was for students, families, and educators, it had a silver lining: Public schools dramatically increased their capacity in terms of technology and online learning. For decades, these tools have been used effectively in conjunction with quality in-person instruction to provide some students with more robust learning opportunities that are tailored to their needs. Now it is clear that these opportunities must be available to all. Blended learning, or hybrid learning, refers to models where classroom learning is supplemented by asynchronous online course components that give students control over the pace and direction of their own learning. At the high school level, a simple example is moving teacher lectures to videos that students can watch on their own time and at their own pace, allowing class time to be used for

more in-depth interactive and inquiry-based activities, as well as expert guidance from teachers. Independent online learning can allow students to do anything from practicing basic skills to engaging in complex research projects.

Recent research on technology-supported learning has found that well-designed blended instruction can be more effective than in-classroom learning alone when it:

- Combines in-person and asynchronous instruction in strategic ways that allow students to engage deeply with both the subject matter and teachers or groups of peers. The more intense the interaction among students, teachers, and interactive content, the deeper the learning.
- Gives students control over how they engage with online content. Students do better when they can go at their own pace, on their own time; when they have some choice over their learning strategies; and when materials enable them to engage deeply and critically with course content.
- Provides high-quality interactive multimedia materials. For example, students whose teachers integrated the use of the Pathways to Freedom Electronic Field Trips—an online collection of interactive activities designed by Maryland Public Television—in their teaching about slavery and the Underground Railroad outperformed those who had the same unit without these materials. Science students who used a virtual web-based science lab, which allowed them to conduct virtual experiments while teachers observed student work and corrected errors online, outperformed those who did an in-person manual science lab. Special education students who used a web-based program that supports writing in action (by prompting attention to the topical organization and structure of ideas during the planning and composing phases of writing) outperformed those who had the same materials in hard copy in the classroom.
- Provides opportunities for formative feedback, reflection, and revision: for example, offering resources for further practice and research when students answer an item incorrectly, providing prompts for students to reflect on their problem-solving activities or provide explanations regarding their work, or asking questions as students design studies to support their thinking processes.¹⁰¹

Explicit Teaching and Scaffolding

Teachers in effective schools work to ensure that students are taught the skills they need to develop and will be expected to apply. Instead of reducing the demands of the curriculum, the schools use formative assessments to understand what skills students already have and then construct a curriculum that explicitly teaches students how to study, how to approach academic tasks, how to read and write at a college level, and how to evaluate their own and others' work. This requires that teachers be conscious about teaching the skills needed to enable student success.

Explicit Teaching of Academic, Social, and Emotional Skills. The explicit teaching of academic, social, and emotional skills is especially important in high school. Much high school teaching assumes that students have already mastered advanced skills in reading, writing, and inquiry. Yet many 9th-graders are underprepared for high school. Some can only read at a basic level; are quickly swamped by the demands of serious academic texts; and do not know how to conduct research, synthesize information, or plan and structure a paper, experiment, or project. When students' skill gaps are not addressed, they often feel like a failure and begin to opt out. Effective high schools support less-skilled students to succeed not by offering a dumbed-down curriculum in a lower track, but by redesigning to make time and space for explicitly teaching the skills they need. This may occur within the core classroom, in special lab courses attached to rigorous classes in a separate period, in resource room settings, through online supports, or in small group tutoring contexts during or after the school day.

Effective schools also integrate social, emotional, and cognitive skills into instruction, explicitly providing instruction in how to recognize, name, and work through emotions, including anxiety about academic tasks and other school happenings; how to work collaboratively with others; how to engage in productive struggle toward learning and to persevere when challenges are encountered; and how to develop a growth mindset by seeing the process of feedback and revision as an opportunity, not a threat or a failure.

Scaffolding. In addition to teaching skills, student-centered teachers also provide careful scaffolding for student tasks. Instead of simply assigning students a research paper, for example, they lead students through a step-by-step process, from framing a question to finding sources to taking notes to developing a thesis to outlining to writing and editing, which leads them to a high-quality finished product. Students with different skill levels or learning needs receive different kinds of scaffolding. For example, a student who has never written a research paper before might be given model thesis statements from which to select and helped to write an outline for the paper, while a more experienced classmate might be expected to develop their own original thesis and outline.¹⁰²

One way to scaffold learning is through well-designed group work. Such collaborative learning starts with the design of “group-worthy tasks” that require different kinds of skills and abilities, and it is implemented through roles that support distributed expertise among the members. The learning process is often further structured through a set of questions or activity guides that provide substantial scaffolding, and it is accompanied by active peer and teacher coaching and assistance. Groups may present their findings or products and are taught to reflect on the work itself and on their group processes using rubrics that are themselves a form of intellectual scaffolding. This combination of factors, when applied to authentic, open-ended tasks, enables what educators Elizabeth Cohen and Rachel Lotan call complex instruction, an approach that has been found to support increased achievement that is also more equitably distributed.¹⁰³

Feedback and Revision

Another important characteristic of schools with a student-centered pedagogy is a learning environment in which teachers are aware of what students are thinking, and where the curriculum does not move on when students do not learn immediately. Unlike the traditional “teach, test, and hope for the best” approach, student-centered teachers do not say, “You got a C- on this assignment” and then move on to the next unit without looking back. Just as mastery is developed in the real world—whether by an Olympic skater, a musician, an athlete, or a scholar—work is structured so that students have the opportunity to tackle difficult tasks by iterating toward excellence.

Just as mastery is developed in the real world, work is structured so that students have the opportunity to tackle difficult tasks by iterating toward excellence.

Culture of Revision and Redemption. Teachers construct a culture of revision and redemption that encourages students to attempt challenging work, provides continual opportunities for practice and revision, and supports students in developing the courage and confidence to work continuously to improve in their successive efforts. Within the guidelines of a performance assessment system (see [Feature 6: Authentic Assessment](#)), students can revise a piece of work again and again until it becomes better, and it becomes better still, finally meeting the standards the school has set.

Feedback. A student-centered pedagogy also establishes regular feedback among members of the classroom community as a gift. For example, students might be expected to read one another’s essay drafts and provide comments using a rubric that identifies key features of quality. In this way, students internalize standards and begin to apply them to their work on a regular basis. At the end of a lesson, a teacher might ask students to provide feedback on what they learned or which parts of the lesson worked more or less well for them. Periodically a teacher might host a community circle to discuss the effectiveness of the class. Soliciting feedback in multiple ways elevates student voice in the classroom and creates a culture in which everyone is always learning, including the teacher.

Educators who have worked to implement a student-centered pedagogy will understand quite well that it is very challenging to do so unless the school is already redesigned to support this kind of learning. If a teacher has a pupil load of 150 students or more, it will be more difficult to provide individualized scaffolds or ask students to do multiple revisions of a piece of work based on feedback. If the school uses pacing guides based on the expectation that the teacher’s role is to “give a chapter, give a test, give a grade,” teachers will feel there is no time to offer meaningful performance tasks that can guide a deeper learning process. If a school’s culture is not safe and inclusive, students will be less able to focus on the in-depth thinking and effort that challenging work requires. If teachers do not have time for collaboration and professional development, they may not know how to adjust their instruction to meet students’ needs. The features described here do not operate in isolation but rather build on one another to create environments in which all young people can thrive.

School Profile: Teaching So That All Students Can Learn at Gateway Public Schools



Photo provided by Gateway Public Schools.

Gateway High School was founded as a public high school in San Francisco, CA, in 1998 by a group of parents of students with disabilities who wanted to create a gateway to college for all students, regardless of learning style or family income. In 2011, Gateway opened a partner middle school. Together, the schools serve approximately 800 students who are admitted by lottery, with priority given to students with disabilities (about 25% of enrollees). About 80% are students of color, and most are from low-income families. About 98% of students graduate within 4 years of entering high school, and throughout its history, 96% of Gateway graduates have gone on to postsecondary education.

In keeping with the founding mission to support students with different learning styles, the Gateway schools practice an **inclusion model** in which students with learning disabilities take the same general education classes as their peers, with various additional supports. Gateway teachers believe that all students have different educational and emotional needs, regardless of whether they have a documented learning disability. Executive Director Sharon Olken explains the respect for universal human dignity that underlies this approach: “All the ways that people come to us different from each other are what make them unique and awesome and should not limit what they can achieve.”

Staff are explicit about discussing these learning differences from the outset to educate students about different ways of learning, so these discussions become part of their language and they develop an understanding that, as one teacher said, “It’s not everyone doing the same thing, but everyone getting what they need.”

Gateway's teachers work to get to know students so they can provide appropriate **scaffolding** for learning differences as early as possible, and students come to know about their own learning processes so they can eventually scaffold for themselves. Teachers have two aims: to create accessibility for all students in their classes and to help students identify how they learn and advocate for their own learning needs. Structures that enable staff and students to become connected include an advisory system that ensures each student has an adult advocate and liaison to the family, along with a daily advisory class; teaching teams with common planning time that share small cohorts of students for academic classes and a learning seminar; and regular outreach to families that is also built into teachers' and advisors' calendars.

To provide time for student-centered learning and reduce the number of students each teacher sees, Gateway has a **modified block schedule**. Core classes are organized in extended blocks to engage students in in-depth inquiry-based learning experiences in each class and to support coteaching and push-in support from the school's learning specialists and Learning Center teams.

Learning specialists share common planning time with content-area teachers so that they are fully integrated into instructional planning and can coteach lessons. Teachers collaborate to develop scaffolded texts for different reading levels, so all students can access the content in a way that works for them. Learning specialists often host small reading groups for students who need additional support, such as stopping and discussing between paragraphs of a complex reading.

When students need more support outside of class, they can go to **Gateway's Learning Center**, which is available to students with and without identified learning disabilities. The Learning Center offers small classes for students who struggle with decoding or reading comprehension, workshops on note-taking skills, intensive individual and small group support, and a space for quiet work for those who need a less busy learning environment to focus.

One student explained how this flexible and responsive approach to classroom support feels for them:

It's super open-armed, like if you have a question, your teacher will try their best to help you, and they help other people, and they let you and other people join in the conversation so it's not just one person. The teacher can actually just sit with you a minute and they're not just telling you what to do, but they're giving you hints on what to do, so you can try and figure it out yourself.

This approach is part of a commitment to enabling students to guide their own learning. That commitment is reflected in the use of student-led conferences during the school year, which allow students to formally share their portfolios of work and reflections on learning with their parents or guardians and teachers. The middle school uses **Process of Learning rubrics** as a way to focus on the how of learning: the particular pro-social and pro-academic habits and mindsets that contribute to learning and healthy development. Students with disabilities are also involved in planning and helping to lead their own individualized education plan (IEP) meetings, having discussed with their learning specialists what their IEP means for them. Students become proficient in understanding themselves as learners, and they leave the school knowing what they need and how to advocate for themselves. These conferences help students build agency and self-advocacy while also encouraging self-reflection and metacognition—important skills needed for meaningful learning.

These systems for student support at Gateway are embedded in an overall pedagogical approach that is designed to allow diverse learners to access the curriculum. Interdisciplinary **project-based learning and small group work** are common. Teachers spend significant time at the beginning of the school year teaching students how to work together productively, which allows them to engage collaboratively in open-ended discipline-based tasks with multiple entry points. These require interdependence, personal responsibility, and clear criteria for evaluation.

Teachers offer guidance, materials, and explanations, and they are readily available to answer questions and provide feedback; however, didactic instruction is minimal, and the bulk of class time is dedicated to active learning. As one student summed it up:

It's really helpful when teachers engage me and [say], "OK, we're going to do a lecture for 10 [or] 15 minutes where you obtain information so that next, when we do this activity, you know what to do, you have background information, and you can apply that to whatever we're doing."

Having established a clear classroom structure, teachers assume a supportive role in student-led activities. Classrooms are abuzz with students active in the process of questioning, researching, analyzing, and writing for the task at hand.

By offering an engaging, active pedagogy, creating a safe environment around learning differences, and taking a personalized approach that involves scaffolding to meet students where they are, Gateway teachers create the opportunity for students to challenge themselves in ways that are productive for their skill levels. As one student explained:

It's not too far advanced to where I just sit there and can't understand it. But it's not really easy so I just know how to do it automatically. So I like that I have to push myself a little bit, but I don't have to push myself to a breaking point. And if you don't get something, it's easy for you to communicate with your teachers and just ask them to help you with something.

Gateway's student-centered approach to pedagogy—combined with a relationship-driven culture, an emphasis on family engagement, and performance assessment—has produced impressive results.

Source: Cook-Harvey, C. M., Flook, L., Efland, E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2020). *Teaching for powerful learning: Lessons from Gateway Public Schools*. Learning Policy Institute.

Additional Resources

Case Studies of Schools That Illustrate Student-Centered Teaching

- [Internationals Network for Public Schools: A Deeper Learning Approach to Supporting English Learners](#), Martens Roc, Peter Ross, and Laura E. Hernández, Learning Policy Institute: The Internationals model emphasizes rigorous academics, linguistic dignity, and bilingualism. Internationals schools integrate language development across content areas while engaging students in deeper learning—an approach that includes project-based learning, work-based learning, and performance assessments that allow students to explore their interests and learn academic content in personalized and inquiry-based ways.

- [Teaching for Powerful Learning: Lessons From Gateway Public Schools](#), Channa Cook-Harvey, Lisa Flook, Emily Efland, and Linda Darling-Hammond, Learning Policy Institute: Gateway Public Schools' founding ideals—focused on empowering students of all learning styles—have transformed into a set of guiding principles for effectively supporting students of all backgrounds.
- [Teaching the Way Students Learn Best: Lessons From Bronxdale High School](#), Jacqueline Ancess, Bethany L. Rogers, Deanna Duncan Grand, and Linda Darling-Hammond, Learning Policy Institute: This case study of Bronxdale High School in New York City provides an in-depth look at how a successful school serving diverse learners organizes its structures and practices consistent with knowledge rooted in the science of learning and development.

Universal Design for Learning

- [About Universal Design for Learning](#), CAST: This resource and its videos explain the Universal Design for Learning framework and how educators can use it to create instructional goals, assessments, methods, and materials that meet student needs. It points to concrete strategies to guide the implementation of a Universal Design for Learning framework in any learning environment and is accompanied by FAQs and additional resources.
- [Lesson Planning With Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#), Allison Posey, Understood: This step-by-step guide is designed to help educators create lessons that meet the needs of all students. It offers guidance on how to proactively reflect on, design, and implement lessons.
- [Planning Differentiated, Multicultural Instruction for Secondary Inclusive Classrooms](#), Delinda van Garderen and Catharine Whittaker, TEACHING Exceptional Children: This article provides an overview of key principles and examples of differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, and multicultural education, as well as a unit planner template to help educators put these components into action.
- [What Is Assistive Technology?](#) Andrew M. I. Lee, Understood: This web resource explains how assistive technology can help youth overcome learning challenges. It also provides examples of the various tools that can be used in different content areas and with different age groups.

Scaffolding for Learning

- [Resources From the Center for Research on Learning](#), University of Kansas: This center works with schools to improve literacy and learning. It generates resources, including teacher-focused and student-focused interventions that can scaffold and bolster learning.
- [Scaffolding in Education](#), Becton Loveless, Education Corner: This resource provides educators with an overview of the benefits of scaffolding and possible implementation challenges. It also describes various scaffolding techniques and tools that practitioners can use to support teaching and learning.
- [Six Scaffolding Strategies to Use With Your Students](#), Rebecca Alber, Edutopia: This resource describes six scaffolding strategies that practitioners can use to support student learning: (1) show and tell; (2) tap into prior knowledge; (3) provide time to talk; (4) pre-teach vocabulary; (5) use visual aids; and (6) pause, ask questions, pause, review.



Feature 6: Authentic Assessment

“Portfolios are much better than tests. We have to know more and be able to explain it. It’s not just a one-time thing. It’s harder, and it really helps us learn.”

—Student from Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School

What Students Need

In addition to rethinking curriculum and pedagogy, redesigned schools take more meaningful approaches to assessment, which begins with clarity about what students should know and be able to do when they graduate and continues with opportunities to develop, refine, and exhibit those skills in authentic ways that reflect how knowledge is used in the world outside of school.

The modern workplace requires students to demonstrate well-developed thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, design strategies, and communication capabilities that cannot be assessed by most currently used multiple-choice tests. Performance assessments—widely used around the world and increasingly sought in the United States—allow students to demonstrate their knowledge more fully by directly exhibiting a skill, reporting on an investigation, producing a product, or performing an activity. By measuring students’ abilities to apply knowledge to solve pertinent problems, such assessments encourage and support more rigorous and relevant teaching and learning. This approach is both essential to deeper learning and motivating for students.

Research shows that students who regularly engage in such assessments do as well on traditional standardized tests and better on tests of analytic and performance ability than other similar students; they are also better prepared for college. Teachers who regularly use and score such assessments also learn more about how their students understand the material and have developed applied skills, as well as about the standards embedded in the assessments. They are better able to teach to the standards and student needs and to design their own inquiry projects and assessments, which deepen learning opportunities.¹⁰⁴

Key Practices

Clear and Meaningful Expectations

Effective schools have clear and meaningful expectations for students that relate to what they need to learn for a healthy and productive life. Over the past 2 decades, an increasing number of schools, districts, and states have adopted what is known as a **Graduate Profile**, which answers the question, “What do we want students to know and be able to do by the time they graduate?”

Graduate Profiles reflect the knowledge and skills students need to be college and career ready in the 21st century and to meet the challenges our society will face in the years to come. These standards often include ambitious academic goals, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, communication skills, skill in new technologies, cultural competence and multilingualism, creativity, emotional intelligence and leadership skills, and growth mindsets. Graduate Profiles provide important guideposts that students, families, and staff can all understand.¹⁰⁵

Once the goal is established, the school's faculty determine on a more detailed level what is essential for their students to know and be able to do, making principled choices about what is most important—that is, what ideas and skills are central to the discipline, are transferable to other contexts, and allow students to gain access to other ideas and skills. This kind of discipline in choosing material to study is necessary when one understands that students learn more from in-depth study of concepts that they evaluate and skills they apply to new situations than from a cursory overview of many topics.

Performance Assessment

Once a school is clear about what students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate, the next question that arises is, “How will we know if we are succeeding?” That question is best answered by looking at **student work** as the concrete representation of progress toward the standards. As a result, student work is the focus of the school: Student writing, artwork, and other projects are displayed prominently throughout the school to demonstrate this commitment to placing their learning at the center of the school's mission. Student work is also the subject of much teacher and student discussion and analysis. Students have frequent opportunities to engage in serious conversations about their work and to share, reflect upon, and receive feedback on their progress. As teachers look at the work of their students, they learn much more about what is working as they had hoped and what is not than they could learn from scores on standardized tests. And as they look at the work of other teachers' students, they have a window into the curriculum and teaching strategies used in other classrooms.

These conversations about the quality of student work best occur in the framework of a well-crafted **performance assessment system** that more fully reflects what students should learn and be able to do.¹⁰⁶ Performance assessment systems are based on common, schoolwide standards; they are integrated into daily classroom practice; and they show students what they will need to do by providing models, demonstrations, and exhibitions of the kind of work that will be expected of them. They are used to foster learning and continuous improvement, not as a way to push out students or set ambitious goals and allow students to fail. Generally these systems include:

- **portfolios** of student work that demonstrate in-depth study through research papers, scientific experiments, mathematical models, literary critiques and analyses, arts performances, and so on;
- **rubrics** that embody the set of standards against which students' products and performance are judged;
- **oral presentations** (exhibitions) by students to a committee of teachers, peers, and others in the school to test for in-depth understanding and assess the student's readiness for graduation; and
- **opportunities for students to revise** their work and improve in order to demonstrate their learning and meet the standards.

Students develop their portfolios over time with the support of their teachers. Class assignments are designed to meet the portfolio requirements and are judged using the same rubrics. Students revise and improve the work they have done in class, often during advisory time and with the help of their advisor or other classroom teacher, to prepare it for inclusion in the portfolio. Many high schools not only have

a graduation portfolio that students prepare in their last 2 years but also 9th- and 10th-grade portfolios or projects that focus instruction and help students learn how the process of developing and exhibiting complex projects works.

Beyond statements of expectations, effective schools provide common frameworks for how students can achieve them. This may take the form of **common “habits”** that describe and help students acquire the cognitive and social-emotional abilities they need to do well in school. (See [Feature 2: Safe, Inclusive School Climate](#).) These habits may require students to weigh and use evidence, address multiple perspectives, make connections among ideas, evaluate alternatives, and assess the value of the ideas they have studied, as well as to present their ideas clearly and effectively. These habits, which are an essential part of a deeper learning curriculum, are consistently reinforced across classrooms through the use of common assessment rubrics. Whether a student is working on a literary analysis paper or a mathematical proof, their teacher is assessing their work with similar questions, such as: “Did you provide evidence? Did you consider alternative perspectives or approaches? Did you adhere to the conventions of the discipline?”

When students graduate, they leave with a portfolio that they carry proudly, because it represents the work they have done over multiple years; it represents who they are, what they care about, and what they have learned; and it means much more than a test score. Portfolios are not just evaluation instruments; they are complex learning experiences as well as opportunities to reflect on the learning journey.¹⁰⁷ Students in schools that use portfolios consistently report that the portfolios help them learn more. One New York City high school student explained: “You get to do most of the thinking when you work with your portfolio. You have to explain in detail how to do something or why something is important, so that someone who doesn’t know it can understand it.” Another student said: “When you take a test, you don’t feel like you need to know it after it is done. The portfolio sticks in your brain better.”¹⁰⁸

In Practice: Senior Defense Thesis

A row of desks is lined up facing the front of a classroom, where a projector is queued up. The desks are occupied by a judging panel, among them the school librarian and two other educators from a high school in Pasadena Unified School District in California. The panelists wrap up their discussion of the student presentation they have just observed, and then the school librarian steps outside to call in the next student, Maria, who is ready and waiting in the hallway.

Maria enters the classroom dressed professionally and stands poised in front of the panelists. She is here to present her senior defense, a culminating event of her high school education as a Pasadena Unified student. Her professionalism signals how seriously she takes the experience. Maria pulls up her PowerPoint with support from the librarian and waits at the front of the room for a cue from her judging panel that they are ready for her to begin her presentation.

She begins by introducing herself and sharing her educational journey. Maria is currently a 12th-grader who has been a student in Pasadena Unified since 6th grade. When she moved to Dallas from Peru at age 5 and skipped kindergarten, she did not speak English. She reflects that it was only once she moved to Pasadena Unified that “[her] life started.” She credits this to her involvement in the Puente program—an extracurricular program designed to support the college

readiness of first-generation Latino/a students—and the mentorship of two particular teachers at her high school. “Yes, they are teachers to me,” she reflects. “But they are also my mentors—my father figures. They’ve seen me laugh; they’ve seen me cry.”

After introducing herself, Maria presents her first artifact—a research paper she wrote on the topic of “designer babies,” a genetic concept that touches on both science and ethics. As she presents, she reflects on both the content and process of her research, noting that the assignment taught her how to “search deeper” in her thinking. Throughout her presentation, she maintains strong eye contact with the panelists, gestures to help communicate her points, and displays a strong understanding of her research topic.

Next, Maria presents her second and third artifacts—a reflection on her experiences volunteering at a local Ronald McDonald House with a group of her peers and an original dance she choreographed with a group of her peers for a school basketball game. Throughout her reflections, she shares how these artifacts helped her cultivate the district’s graduation competencies of collaboration and creativity and develop the leadership that has allowed her to take greater ownership for projects in her academic coursework. To conclude her presentation, Maria shares her plans for the future: to stay involved in her community and study psychology at a 4-year college to learn “why people talk and think the way they do.” She shares:

All of this, and my artifacts, show that I am ready to graduate. ... I’ve gone through those struggles and learned how to conquer them. I can take them into college. College is not an easy path. [My high school] has taught me how to not give up.

Source: Adams, J., & Kaul, M. (2020). *Using performance assessments to support student learning in Pasadena Unified School District*. Learning Policy Institute.

School Supports

The data gathered through an effective performance assessment system help teachers hold themselves accountable and improve their practices. As one New York City teacher put it, “Portfolios are a key way into individual work with students, to see what’s working and what’s not, and what we need to do better.”

Student assessment is a learning tool, a tool for guiding progress, not a method for sorting students into successes and failures. At too many schools today, people say, “We know we have high standards because so many students fail to meet them.” This is actually an example of low standards for the educators in those schools. Having high standards for young people means having high standards for adults in their work with young people, as educators work together to create a wider range of strategies to meet student needs. Standards and assessment cannot be separated from curriculum and instruction. Teachers help students achieve by constructing the pathways to success with careful scaffolding and opportunities to iterate.

Student assessment is a learning tool, a tool for guiding progress, not a method for sorting students into successes and failures.

Joint curricular planning among teachers is needed for curriculum and assessment to “add up” to these expectations throughout the school—to build ideas and skills from one course to another and from one year to the next. This enables more powerful learning than can be achieved with a fragmented, disconnected course of study that leaves students with gaps, holes, and misunderstandings as they try to put the pieces together by themselves. Teachers and students alike understand that everyone is heading toward the Graduate Profile. (For more on common planning, see [Feature 7: Well-Prepared and Well-Supported Teachers](#).)

Performance assessment networks can also support school learning. A growing number of high schools—and some districts—have developed their own assessment systems to support deeper learning.¹⁰⁹ The [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#) has supported dozens of high schools in implementing a portfolio assessment system with a waiver from state Regents exams since the 1990s, having demonstrated stronger college performance from students experiencing this form of deeper learning and rigorous assessment.¹¹⁰ These schools share common expectations for project work in each core discipline and use the same rubrics for assessment, and they calibrate scoring within and across schools.

In more recent years, a [California Performance Assessment Collaborative](#) has emerged, serving a wide range of schools across the state, along with districts such as Oakland Unified School District, which requires a capstone project of all seniors; Pasadena Unified School District, which requires a graduation portfolio; and Los Angeles Unified School District, which features graduation portfolios in all of its Linked Learning high schools (about one quarter of all high schools in the district). A study of these systems found that they expanded opportunities for students to demonstrate deeper learning competencies—including improved communication and presentation skills; greater confidence in college and career preparation; and growth in social-emotional skills such as perseverance, creative problem-solving, and a growth mindset. It also found that teachers reported an increased focus on alignment among curriculum, instruction, and assessment across subjects and grade levels; continuous reflection on and improvement of their instructional practices; more positive relationships with their students; and closer collaboration with their colleagues.¹¹¹

Similar collaboratives in New England and [Hawaii](#) join states like [New Hampshire](#), [Oregon](#), and [Washington](#), which have long designed and supported local performance assessments. The College Board has integrated project-based performance tasks in many of its courses—including the [AP Research course](#), the capstone [AP Seminar](#), and the [AP Computer Science course](#)—evaluated as part of the final score, and has announced it will spread the practice to its other courses over the next few years, as evidence shows that students are more successful both in the courses and in college as a result of these experiences.¹¹²

In Practice: Learning Through Revision

At Oceana High School in Pacifica, CA, the school’s performance assessment system is explicitly designed as a learning tool and has helped create a schoolwide culture of revision and redemption (see [Feature 5: Student-Centered Pedagogy](#)). All 12th-graders at Oceana complete a yearlong Senior Exhibition project. The project includes a research paper, which is scored on a rubric that includes a category called “Revisit,” indicating the paper needs to be revised to meet the standard. Teachers offer structured support for the revision process. As one student explained, “With the help of my mentor and humanities teacher, they both told me that this doesn’t mean to stop, but it means to

keep trying. I kept trying and put together a great paper that I feel ‘killed it’ in all aspects.” Although the revisit concept was originally created for the senior research paper, the idea of a revisit (the opportunity to revise and improve work) has now become a cultural norm throughout the school, with most teachers offering students revisits on major assignments. In 2022–23, the school adjusted its schedule to add a “flex time” period (see [Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships](#)), which makes it easier for students to see their teachers to work on revisits.

Source: Maier, A. (2016). *Performance assessment profile: Oceana High School*. California Performance Assessment Collaborative & Learning Policy Institute.

Another aspect of using assessment for learning is being thoughtful about how to use data. Teachers and school leaders today have access to huge amounts of data about their students, and in many schools a lot of time is spent in meetings talking about data, with no real impact on student learning. Effective schools are clear about which data they look at and why. Even with a quality performance assessment system, educators can sometimes become overfocused on rubric scores and miss important information that explains *why* students may be struggling. Data can also be used to help teachers understand those factors that support success. They can then incorporate those factors into their teaching.

Educators Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan¹¹³ have introduced a framework that helps educators stay focused on which kind of data to use for which purposes:

- **Satellite data:** Lagging indicators (such as standardized test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates, teacher retention, etc.) can be useful for longer-term strategic planning.
- **Map data:** Formal school- or classroom-based data (such as analysis of student work and scores on performance assessments or other school-level math assessments, information from student or staff surveys, etc.) can be used to understand trends in a more nuanced way.
- **Street data:** Qualitative and experiential data (such as interviews with students, fishbowl discussions or student feedback groups, shadowing a student, structured classroom observations, etc.) tell us what works for students.

It is easy to overfocus on satellite-level data, which can tell educators which students are succeeding and which are not (often revealing opportunity gaps), but which do not provide a solution. Map-level data, especially student work, can provide a better diagnosis of the problem. Yet frequently the path forward to improving student performance is found through careful attention to street-level data, where teachers listen deeply to understand the student experience and then make the necessary adjustments to allow all students to succeed, which is what authentic assessment with supports enables.

Effective schools devote significant time and resources to teacher professional development that is linked to student learning. If performance assessment results indicate that a teaching team is struggling to support their students in a particular area, those teachers carefully analyze student work and then engage in peer observations and other street data collection to understand what is getting in the way of student success. Schools may also engage students themselves in this process, inviting students to observe

teachers and provide feedback. These cycles of inquiry can then lead to a collaborative schoolwide effort in which the faculty develops collective ownership of a pedagogical framework—a set of common practices that is effective in supporting their students to meet high expectations. (See [profile of June Jordan School for Equity](#) in [Feature 7: Well-Prepared and Well-Supported Teachers](#) for an example of such an effort.)

Such schoolwide goal setting and shared public assessment of both students' and teachers' work convey valued ideals in concrete ways. They provide occasions to recognize and celebrate student and teacher work, and they make clear the areas in which more work is needed. The public nature of these processes is an important incentive for teachers not only to prepare individual students well but also to work to improve their overall teaching. When done well, assessment becomes a learning tool for everyone in the school community.

School Profile: Student Portfolios at New York Performance Standards Consortium and Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School



Photo provided by New York Performance Standards Consortium.

The [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#) is a network of 38 schools serving 30,000 students in New York that have agreed to use common performance assessment measures. Even though their students enter with lower academic skills than New York City averages, Consortium schools have significantly higher graduation and college-going rates, especially for Black and Latino/a students, English learners, and students with special needs. Since the 1990s, this evidence has persuaded the state to allow the schools to waive most Regents exams so that they can do this deeper work.

Students at each Consortium school complete four **performance-based assessment tasks** to graduate: a literary analysis paper, a science experiment and lab report, a math problem-solving analysis, and a social studies research paper. (Individual schools also add tasks in the arts, art

criticism, world language, internship, or other areas.) These assessment tasks grow out of classroom work—students typically complete the tasks in every subject-area course throughout high school, improving with practice. Then, before graduation, students present and defend their best work before a committee of staff, fellow students, and outside evaluators. The written work, as well as the oral presentation, is evaluated using common Consortium-wide rubrics, and external assessors validate the results to ensure that expectations are similar across schools.

All the Consortium’s performance-based assessment tasks require “extensive reading, writing, discussion, and critical thinking.” For students to succeed on the tasks, teachers must design challenging, culturally responsive curricula that respond to student interests and questions. To support this process, the Consortium and individual schools offer extensive professional development for teachers. The tasks themselves grow out of the daily work in the classroom and are rooted in the collaborative efforts of students and teachers, creating an authentic feedback loop that results in improved academic outcomes.

The Consortium recently engaged in a research pilot with the City University of New York (CUNY), which agreed to evaluate promising Consortium school students on the basis of their portfolio assessments if they did not meet the CUNY SAT cut score for admission. The initial study found that the students admitted on this basis had higher college GPAs, initial credits, and persistence in college after their first year than peers from other New York City schools who had higher SAT scores on average.

[Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School](#), a small neighborhood school in the South Bronx, is a Consortium member. Located in the poorest congressional district in the United States, this New York City community high school helps students succeed by, among other things, focusing both on deeper learning and on meeting a wide range of students’ needs. The school meets needs through a **community schools model** that offers health care and other services in collaboration with the Children’s Aid Society; an attentive advisory system; and pioneering uses of technology to cultivate both synchronous and asynchronous classrooms that allow students to pursue mastery.

Recently named a School of Opportunity by the National Education Policy Center and a Canopy school of innovation by the Christensen Institute, the school is grounded in a belief that students learn best by investigating authentic issues in ways that require collaboration, personal responsibility, care for others, and a tolerance for uncertainty. These crucial habits of mind and work are nurtured in classrooms where students are engaged in a **curriculum centered on projects they design** and carry out themselves and by work that students undertake outside of traditional classrooms through internship learning. In 2018, 97% of Fannie Lou Hamer’s students applied to and were accepted to college.

The school works to nurture students’ abilities to connect, question, innovate, and communicate. Students investigate personally meaningful problems and are assessed using a performance-based system that ensures rigorous student inquiry. In the 9th and 10th grades, students complete a portfolio of their work from each academic class. In January of their 10th-grade year, with support from their advisor, students revise their portfolios and add a reflection component, and then

present the portfolio to a committee during the Spring Family Conference before they move on to the 11th grade. In 11th and 12th grades, in preparation for graduation, students complete seven “Masteryes”—one each in Literature, History, Math, Science, and Autobiography, plus two subjects of their choice. The school’s website explains that these tasks require significant independent work “with an eye toward college expectations” and “are designed to reflect an in-depth understanding of a particular issue in the context of the overall discipline and incorporation of the Habits of Mind and work.”

Once the classroom teacher has confirmed that a Mastery paper represents a student’s best work and meets the standards of the Consortium rubric, the paper is reviewed by an external evaluator before the student presents and defends it to a panel that includes school staff and external evaluators. Students are eligible for graduation once they have completed all seven Masteryes and successfully completed the panel process in each of the four core content areas, scoring Competent or Higher in all areas on the Consortium rubrics. “Portfolios are much better than tests,” explained one student. “We have to know more and be able to explain it. It’s not just a one-time thing. It’s harder, and it really helps us learn.”

Sources: Fine, M., & Pryiomka, K. (2020). *Assessing college readiness through authentic student work: How the City University of New York and the New York Performance Standards Consortium are collaborating toward equity*. Learning Policy Institute; Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School; Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School. *Why Fannie Lou?*

Additional Resources

Quality Performance Assessment

- [Assessing Learning in the Classroom](#), Jay McTighe and Steve Ferrara, National Education Association: This book describes common principles for effective assessment that educators can use to ensure that assessments inform teaching and improve learning. The authors look at the strengths and limitations of various assessment approaches and share vignettes of effective classroom assessments in action.
- [Assessing Student Learning by Design: Principles and Practices for Teachers and School Leaders](#), Jay McTighe and Steve Ferrara, Teachers College Press: This book provides educators with guidance on how to use assessments to gather relevant data and promote learning. Through its Assessment Planning Framework, it helps educators match assessments to purpose, goals, and content and provides insights on how assessments can promote student growth and instructional improvement.
- [Performance Assessment Resource Bank](#): The Performance Assessment Resource Bank is an online collection of performance tasks and resources—collected from educators and organizations across the United States and reviewed by experts in the field—to support the use of performance assessment for meaningful learning.

- [Quality Criteria for Systems of Performance Assessment for School, District, and Network Leaders](#), Larkin Willis, Aneesha Badrinarayan, and Monica Martinez, Learning Policy Institute: This resource is designed to guide school, district, and network leaders in identifying high-leverage opportunities to advance performance assessment systems and outlining next steps that fit their specific contexts.
- [Quality Performance Assessment: A Guide for Schools and Districts](#), Center for Collaborative Education: This guide describes the process of creating high-quality performance assessments supported by professional development. It also offers tools that can assist educators during this process.

Graduate Profiles

- [Are Graduate Profiles a Fad? Or a Real Fix?](#), Tony Monfiletto, Future Focused Education: This blog post highlights some of the pitfalls with current efforts to establish Graduate Profiles and explains how Graduate Profiles can be transformative tools if they are viewed as promises to young people rather than projections by adults.
- [Deeper Learning and the Graduate Profile](#), San Francisco Unified School District: This web page describes San Francisco Unified School District's Graduate Profile and how it is organized around principles of deeper learning.
- [Remodeling Our System of Assessments in New Mexico](#), Deborah Good, Future Focused Education: This white paper provides a clear overview of why state assessment systems should shift toward performance assessment and what an assessment system for deeper learning could look like. The appendix includes the Central New Mexico Graduate Profile, which is organized around deeper learning competencies.
- [Why Graduate Profiles](#), Scaling Student Success: This website provides examples of graduate profiles from districts across California.

Examples of School and District Performance Assessment Systems

- [California Performance Assessment Collaborative \(CPAC\)](#), Learning Policy Institute: This web page provides information, videos, and lessons captured from the students, educators, policymakers, and researchers in CPAC who are working to study and advance the use of authentic approaches to assessment that require students to demonstrate applied knowledge of content and use of 21st-century skills.
- [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#): The Consortium is a network of schools founded over two decades ago that has successfully put performance assessments into practice. It has also helped build systems that enable authentic assessments to be used as alternatives to standardized testing to gauge student progress and competency. Their website offers tasks and rubrics used for portfolio construction and scoring, as well as examples of student work.

- [The Power of Performance Assessments: Oakland Unified’s Graduate Capstone Project](#), Learning Policy Institute: In this video, seniors from the Oakland Unified School District say they’ll be reaping the benefits and keeping alive the passions that came with their yearlong Graduation Capstone Project as they move on to college and work.
- [Using Performance Assessments to Support Student Learning: How District Initiatives Can Make a Difference](#), Anna Maier, Julie Adams, Dion Burns, Maya Kaul, Marisa Saunders, and Charlie Thompson, Learning Policy Institute: This research series examines the key conditions needed to support the implementation of high-quality performance assessments at the district, school, and classroom levels. Individual case studies explore performance assessment systems in three districts—Los Angeles Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District, and Pasadena Unified School District—while a cross-case report surfaces common themes and findings from across the settings.



Feature 7: Well-Prepared and Well-Supported Teachers

“[When] you’re in isolation and you’re just doing stuff in your classroom, you don’t know if it’s good. You don’t know if you’re actually having an impact. But when you can share it out with other teachers and get their ideas, it becomes not *my* idea but *our* idea. And if I’m struggling, I have someone who can support me on it.”

—Teacher in Madera, CA¹¹⁴

What Students Need

A substantial body of research suggests that one of the most important school determinants of student achievement is the quality of teachers.¹¹⁵ A recent study of California districts that are “positive outliers” in terms of student achievement for Black, Latino/a, and White students found that key factors in their success were teachers’ strong preparation, their stability, and the opportunities they had for professional collaboration, with strategies for developing common norms and practices and sharing them systemwide.¹¹⁶

Teaching in ways that connect with each student and enable them to learn deeply is one of the most complex and difficult jobs there is. As one recent entrant to the profession noted:

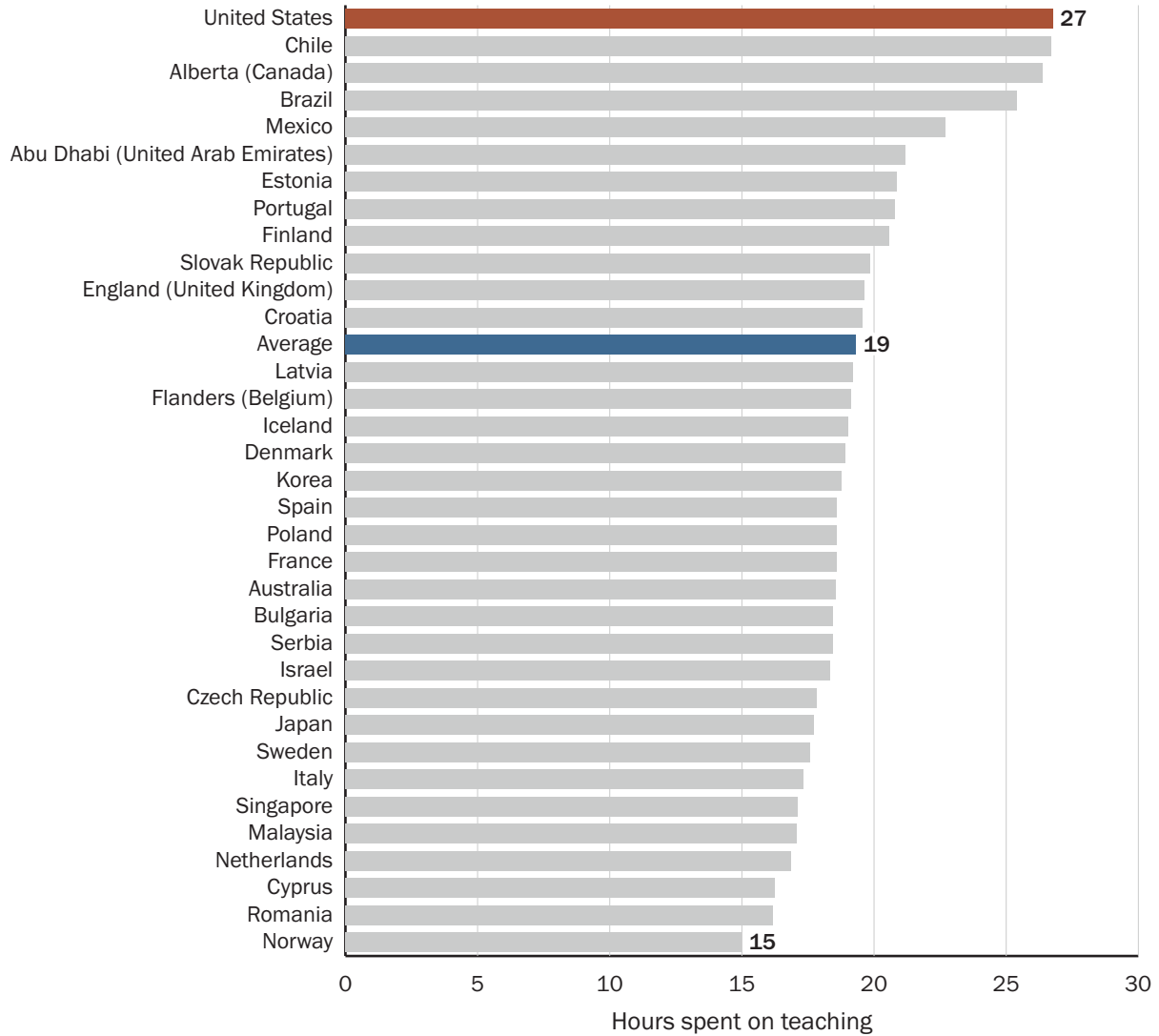
You can be a mediocre to poor teacher very easily. And in that case, I think it’s a simple job. But to be a good teacher and one that expands and keeps learning, it’s the hardest job I’ve ever done—and I’ve done a lot of jobs. ... I had no idea how complex it was and how much of a profession it is.

It is even more difficult to do this job in the factory-model design that created “egg-crate” classrooms in which teachers are lone operators who stamp students with a lesson as they stop in during 5 or more periods a day. With little collaboration and planning time, and few deep learning opportunities themselves, U.S. teachers in traditional high schools have one of the most difficult teaching jobs in the industrialized world.

Compared to teachers in more than 50 other countries surveyed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2018, for example, U.S. teachers were among those who taught the most hours per week and year and had among the least planning time. U.S. teachers worked directly with students about 50% more hours than the international average, leaving them 8 fewer hours per week for nonteaching tasks, such as collaborative planning and professional development, reaching out to parents and students one-on-one, or assessing student work.¹¹⁷ (See [Figure 7.](#)) U.S. teachers also had above-average class sizes¹¹⁸ and taught more students from low-income families than teachers in most other OECD countries.¹¹⁹

Redesigned high schools take a different approach, investing deeply in training and supporting their teachers and providing them with time and opportunities to create a coherent set of practices and become experts at their craft. Teachers with these opportunities are more effective and likely to stay for the long run, with a payoff in student achievement.¹²⁰

Figure 7. U.S. Teachers Teach More Hours per Week Than Teachers in Other Countries



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2018). [Teaching and learning international survey](#).

Key Practices

Teacher Preparation

If teachers are viewed primarily as transmitters of information to students, one could argue that they need little more than basic content knowledge and the ability to string together comprehensible lectures to do an adequate job. But if teachers are to ensure successful learning for students who learn in different ways and encounter a variety of challenges, then they must be prepared as diagnosticians, planners, and leaders who know a great deal about the learning process and have a wide repertoire of tools at their disposal.

There are three key areas in which teachers must be experts: (1) their subject matter and curriculum, (2) the needs of diverse learners and the learning process, and (3) teaching itself. Teachers not only need to know the **subject matter** in their content areas well; they also need to know how to access curriculum resources and how to represent the ideas in their content areas so they are accessible to others.

Teachers also need to understand the **needs of diverse learners and the learning process**. This includes knowing about child and adolescent development—including how young people’s cultures, languages, and experiences affect them—as well as how multiple intelligences and learning differences shape their approaches to school and learning. Each student has a unique mind, and teachers must know how to figure out how students are thinking and learning so they can shape lessons to connect with what students already know and how they learn well. They need to know what motivates people to learn and how people learn in different ways and for different purposes. No matter what content area they are teaching, they must understand language learning and literacy development, which are at the heart of the learning process for all students, especially English learners, who must learn how to communicate in English while they are simultaneously learning content.

Teachers must have deep **knowledge about teaching itself**, which is very complex, involving the development of a safe learning community, the use of a range of pedagogies to meet disciplinary demands and student needs, and skillful use of assessment to identify students’ strengths and needs and help them learn more effectively.

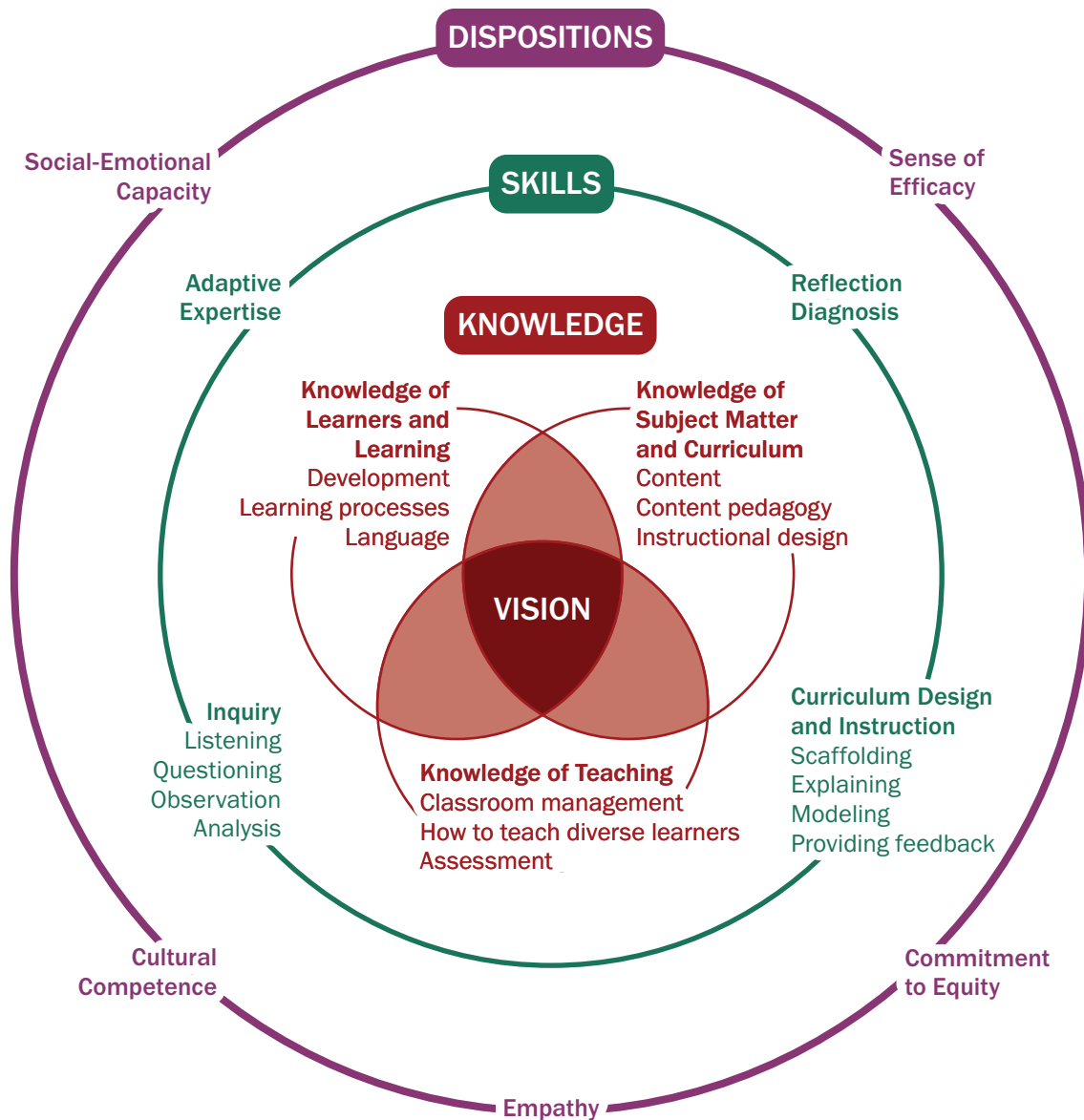
In addition to these areas of **knowledge**, teachers must develop **skills** such as adaptive expertise, inquiry and reflection, and curriculum design, which allow them to listen to and observe what is happening in the classroom on a daily basis and make adjustments to lessons and units to ensure that their students are learning. To accomplish this, teachers must possess and develop **dispositions** including empathy, social-emotional capacity, cultural competence, and a commitment to equity.¹²¹ (See [Figure 8](#).)

Teachers who enter teaching without adequate preparation and who do not receive adequate supports often wind up stereotyping and blaming the students whom they do not understand, especially when their own lack of skills renders the teacher less successful. One teacher who entered teaching through a short summer training program explained: “I found myself having problems with cross-cultural teaching issues, blaming my kids because the class was crazy and out of control, [and] blaming the parents as though they didn’t care about their kids.”¹²² This teacher later entered a teacher education program and found that the tools she acquired transformed her ability to reach her students. Students need access to teachers who themselves have access to knowledge about how to implement a culturally responsive pedagogy that supports students from diverse backgrounds. (See [Feature 3: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching](#).)

Effective schools and districts do not leave teacher hiring to chance. They devote resources and attention to recruiting well-trained educators, often by establishing professional development school partnerships with local teacher education programs. Teachers who enter with comprehensive preparation are half as likely to leave teaching after the first year than those who enter without preparation. Grow Your Own

pathway programs, including paraprofessional pathways and teacher residencies, can support local community members to become effective teachers and provide opportunities for seamless support for new educators, starting during their student teaching and continuing with intensive coaching and mentoring during their initial years in the classroom. These programs, especially when combined with adequate financial supports, can make entering teaching more affordable and reduce attrition while developing a highly skilled teaching force.

Figure 8. Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions for Teaching



Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Schachner, A., & Wojcikiewicz, S. (with Cantor, P., & Osher, D.). (2022). *Educator learning to enact the science of learning and development*. Learning Policy Institute.

In Practice: Creating Teaching Pathways for Redesigned Schools

Many redesigned high schools that are developing more student-centered practices focused on deeper learning and equity are helping to prepare new teachers in partnership with local universities that share similar values. These partnerships are creating pathways for recruiting and mentoring strong, dedicated teachers who understand how to work in these settings effectively. Both Hillsdale High School in San Mateo, CA, and June Jordan School for Equity in San Francisco, CA, created professional development partnerships with Stanford University. These schools support substantial numbers of student teachers or teacher residents on the campus, many of whom ultimately become part of the faculty. The former principal at Hillsdale, who launched the school's redesign, described the pipeline of student teachers from Stanford as a major element in the school's reform strategy, giving an opportunity to train and recruit like-minded teachers into a new way of doing school.

Similarly, principal Mauro Bautista from Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez) in Los Angeles described recruiting and retaining quality teachers as “one of the highest leverage points for the success of our school.” He received his teacher and principal training at the UCLA School of Education, which focuses on preparing social justice educators to teach in an urban setting. He invites candidates from the program to observe classes and do their student teaching at Mendez and often makes job offers to promising candidates. An aligned vision and supportive leadership are two of the reasons Mendez had no turnover of staff from 2017 to 2020.

The UCLA Community School (UCLA-CS) was designed as a teaching school where residents from UCLA's Teacher Education Program learn and teach alongside mentor faculty and with the support of UCLA's teacher educators. The arrangement benefits both UCLA-CS and the aspiring educators. The school often hires residents as teachers, confident that these new faculty members will be aligned with the school's culture and practices.

Jihyun Park was one such resident. She immigrated to the United States at 19 and knows firsthand the challenges of learning English and navigating a new city and country. Her passion to educate emergent bilingual students blossomed when she worked with new students at UCLA-CS as a UCLA undergraduate intern in 2014. “That is when,” she reflected in an interview, “I decided that I wanted to work at UCLA-CS, where they gather every single resource to accommodate newcomers [so they can] achieve success and feel welcomed and wanted.” After Park graduated from UCLA in 2014, she worked at the school as a community representative and supervision aide and then as a substitute teacher. She later enrolled in the teacher residency program offered by UCLA's Teacher Education Program and was hired as a teacher in 2019.

These opportunities become more powerful for schools and for teacher candidates as they become increasingly deliberate. Principal Matthew Willis at Hinkley High School in Denver, CO, a comprehensive urban high school that has become a professional development school partner with

the University of Colorado at Denver, described the importance of training and recruiting teachers who understand that deeper learning is collaborative, social, and personalized, explaining to novices what he expects them to see and learn in the classroom:

What you see will contrast with rows, teachers talking, students taking notes, sitting still. This school believes in rigor, relevance, relationships, with relationships being the key to the others. Relationships are what are worked on most; then how to leverage relationships to get depth of knowledge, rigor, and relevance. You will see norms of relational discourse, moving up cognitive levels, and using relationships to do that. Interactive, collaborative, independent work. Relationships is probably the number one value for instruction and classroom management.

He sees a double benefit to Hinkley being a professional development school. He and his faculty get a “stream of people whom we get to train and expose to our approach,” and at the same time, he gets to know and choose strong new teachers to stay at the school. The faculty also appreciate the on-site support and professional development from their university partners, which both help to keep their values and concepts aligned and contribute to the school’s own improvement efforts.

Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Oakes, J., Wojcikiewicz, S., Hyler, M. E., Guha, R., ... Harrell, A. (2019). *Preparing teachers for deeper learning*. Harvard Education Press.

Ongoing Learning for Teachers

Effective teachers are not only well prepared; they are also continually learning. Redesigned schools commit serious time and resources to collaborative planning and ongoing professional development. This supports both more thoughtful and effective teaching within the classroom and greater coherence across courses and grade levels, with associated gains in achievement.¹²³ Without expert teachers who are continually learning and growing as professionals, much of the other work that schools seek to do cannot be successful.

Teachers in factory-model schools have often experienced professional development in the form of one-time “sit and get” sessions that are disconnected from their daily practices or their individual needs. However, effective professional development is quite different. From studies that document teacher learning–associated gains in student learning, researchers have learned that effective professional development:

- is content focused;
- incorporates active learning utilizing adult learning theory;
- supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts;
- uses models and modeling of effective practice;
- provides coaching and expert support;
- offers opportunities for feedback and reflection; and
- is of sustained duration.¹²⁴

Effective schools design professional learning along these lines, creating adult learning experiences that not only enable teachers to expand their repertoires to help students learn more but also provide opportunities for school staff to revisit the school’s vision and goals, develop a collective perspective on teaching

practice—which creates a more coherent experience for students—and create a stronger school culture. They also provide time for teachers to plan curriculum together and talk together about individual students to determine how to best support them. Consistent high-quality teaching across a school is developed by creating a deliberate repertoire of strategies and a well-sequenced plan for content that connects to students’ prior learning, and doing so in collaboration with other faculty so that knowledge is shared.

Time for Teacher Collaboration

This work is made possible by building in significant time for teacher collaboration during the workday to allow for joint planning and learning. However, in many American schools, teachers spend their Sunday nights sitting at their kitchen tables, all by themselves, inventing their lessons for the week. The scientific managers who created the factory design felt that teachers are only working when they are alone in their classrooms, stamping students with lessons on the conveyor belt of the industrial-model school. The presumption of the assembly line school was that teachers would not need time to plan or evaluate their teaching, because they would merely march through the lessons in a prescribed curriculum. Expertise in teaching—as in many other fields—comes from a process of sharing, attempting new ideas, reflecting on practice, and developing new approaches. Good teachers constantly learn with and from one another, and they need time to do it. As a teacher in one New York City redesigned school put it:

Good teachers constantly learn with and from one another, and they need time to do it.

Now that the schedule allows teachers to meet, we help each other. We write curriculum together. The variety of work we do with students is greater. ... Teachers share what they are doing in a formal way in team meetings. They plan together and share what they have done. There is whole school sharing and there are summer institutes where we have more time to reflect. There is more coherence than in schools where teachers work alone.¹²⁵

As noted earlier, this shared planning is something that many other countries and some schools in the United States build into their structures for schooling. On average, teachers in OECD countries spend about 19 hours of a 40-hour work week in their classrooms with students. Thus, they have 20 hours or more per week to plan lessons, to meet with students and parents, and to work together and learn from one another. This collaborative work includes developing curriculum and assessments, observing each other’s classes, and participating in study groups and other professional development activities.

The results of this collaboration are seen in improved student outcomes, both in other countries and in the many redesigned schools in the United States that have prioritized teacher expertise. They have demonstrated that if collaborative planning and professional development are a priority in school design, it is possible to reallocate resources and reorganize the schedule so that teachers teach fewer hours during the day and have at least 5 hours per week to work together. (See [Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships](#) and [Appendix A: Sample Budget and Staffing Models](#).)

Strategies for Teacher Learning

This collaboration time can be used not only for planning but also for peer-supported learning. One example of collective learning is **teacher action research**, in which educators engage in systematic and rigorous inquiry about a question of practice, including cycles of planning, acting, observing results,

and reflection. Action research can focus on the needs of a particular student or group of students, broader questions of classroom practice, or analyses of schoolwide practices.¹²⁶ For example, Darlene Tieu, a 10th-grade chemistry teacher at Mann UCLA Community School in South Los Angeles, wanted to adjust the way she was teaching climate change so it would be more relevant to her students' everyday experiences. Listening to her students, she found that they were concerned about the lack of parks in their community compared to wealthier neighborhoods. Through the action research process, Tieu partnered with a colleague to develop and test a unit that linked students' questions about urban parks and trees to the scientific concepts of the carbon cycle as well as sociological and geographic issues such as redlining, urban displacement due to freeways, and gentrification.¹²⁷

Reciprocal peer observations are another effective learning practice used in many schools. Teachers schedule time to observe one another's lessons and provide structured feedback, sometimes responding to questions the teachers themselves have posed or another agreed-upon set of questions or criteria linked to their goals for effective practice. Sometimes teachers film one another's lessons and choose a segment of the lesson to watch and analyze together during a reflection meeting.

A more in-depth form of peer observation and analysis is a technique called **lesson study**. Initially launched in Japan and now used in many countries, including the United States, lesson study allows teachers to plan lessons together and try them out, first on one another and then in the classroom, with other teachers observing and offering feedback. For example, a teacher might use their colleagues as the audience for a new lesson on solving algebraic equations. Teachers would plan and role-play the lesson together, offering suggestions for fine-tuning it. Then when the teacher gives the lesson in their classroom, their colleagues might observe the lesson in the classroom, taking notes on what happened, and then debriefing it together. Researchers Jim Stigler and Harold Stevenson have called the shared lessons that result from this type of planning "polished stones" because they are so carefully crafted.¹²⁸ Lead by Learning, a program of Mills College at Northeastern University in Oakland, CA, calls a similar collaborative process "Public Learning," which supports teachers to honestly explore teaching dilemmas to drive improvement.

Collaborative practices can be even more powerful when teachers share expertise and ideas across schools and districts. California's Instructional Leadership Corps (ILC) is an example of a teacher-driven network that supports educators to lead professional development with their colleagues in other schools. Rather than relying on outside consultants to provide one-time sessions that usually do not change practice, ILC networks support ongoing relationships. Newer teachers can observe teacher leaders modeling lessons with their students and then try the strategies in their own classrooms and receive feedback. Not only do teachers value professional learning led by their colleagues, but these types of networks allow veteran teachers to grow as mentors and leaders.¹²⁹ A teacher in Madera, CA, explained that involvement with the program did more than allow ILC members to provide support for other teachers' individual practice; it also helped teachers understand how they could work together as a professional community to move student learning forward:

[When] you're in isolation and you're just doing stuff in your classroom, you don't know if it's good. You don't know if you're actually having an impact. But when you can share it out with other teachers and get their ideas, it becomes not *my* idea but *our* idea. And if I'm struggling, I have someone who can support me on it.

An ILC coach noted:

Creating the professional development with my team has pushed me to want to become better, to notice the need. ... Professional development is never-ending. There's always the need to develop as a professional.

School Profile: Teacher Collaboration to Develop Social Justice Teaching at June Jordan School for Equity



Photo source: June Jordan School for Equity. (2013). *JJSE Portraits*: Giulio Sorro [Video].

June Jordan School for Equity is a small high school in San Francisco, CA, that was founded in 2003 by a community organizing effort among teachers, parents, and youth. The school serves students of color from low-income families in a city with high levels of socioeconomic inequality. Part of the school's commitment to the community was to be transparent with families and students about what a good education looked like, so they could help hold the staff accountable for providing it. The school was founded with a performance assessment system that answered the questions: What do we want students to know and be able to do when they graduate? and How will we know? But the answer to a critical third question was less consistent: What are we going to do in our classrooms to make sure all students get there? Thus, over the course of 4 years, the faculty worked together to develop a pedagogical framework that came to be known as "The Art of Social Justice Teaching," which the school community uses to define excellent teaching.

The staff examined outside resources, including the popular book *Teach Like a Champion*, which provided helpful labels and video examples of specific teaching techniques—but they found the “Champion” approach to be too shallow and reductionist for the kind of intellectually rigorous, student-centered classrooms they were working to create. So they observed one another teaching and created their own categories to describe important aspects of practice, and they took their own videos of one another teaching to highlight examples of strong practice. This process made classrooms into public spaces, where it was common for colleagues (and later, student and parent observers as well) to visit and analyze teaching, with the goal of highlighting successful practices and making them more consistent. “It’s like a hitter in baseball,” explained one staff member. “Even the best batters make outs two thirds of the time, and sometimes it’s good to ask what you’re doing wrong. But it’s even more important to analyze how you get the base hits, and to work on hitting more of them.” This approach allowed teachers to be vulnerable with their colleagues and led to more requests for help when they were struggling.

Drawing on their observations, teaching videos, and research around best practices, the faculty developed a categorization of pedagogical techniques that allowed them to talk about teaching using common language. The resulting Art of Social Justice Teaching Framework (see [Figure 9](#)) has six categories, which, together, characterize teachers as “warm demanders” who coach students as intellectuals in a safe classroom community grounded in knowledge of students and a social justice curriculum.

Now that the framework has been developed, classrooms have an open-door policy in which informal observations by teachers, students, parents, and other visitors are commonplace, using the six categories as the starting point for discussion and analysis. Evaluations by administrators often use the language of the framework and reference specific techniques teachers are consistently strong at and areas in which they are working to grow their skills. Teachers use videos and observations of their colleagues’ strong practices to learn and improve their own teaching.

Student leaders offer teachers the opportunity for formal observations and feedback, using a modified version of the framework with the same six categories but more “student-friendly language,” which students themselves developed to help their peers understand how the adults on campus were talking about teaching. These common expectations of what good instruction looks like also allow students to give teachers informal real-time feedback about their pedagogy so teachers can design lessons that better meet all students’ needs.

Matt Alexander, the school’s former principal, emphasizes that the instructional framework is not describing something new, but rather making the invisible visible: “Good teachers everywhere are already doing this work. This just creates common language and a forum to talk about it. It helps new teachers grow and creates authentic public accountability for everyone.”

Figure 9. Art of Social Justice Teaching Framework

<p>WARM DEMANDER</p> <p><i>Develop your students as human beings first</i></p> <p>Family and Culture: Understand and honor the strengths of the community</p> <p>Authenticity: Model vulnerability and humility, be an ally, respect your students</p> <p>Clear Boundaries: Show strength, listen and affirm, challenge and offer a choice</p> <p>Growth Mindset: Believe in the "impossible," embrace failure</p>	<p>STUDENTS AS INTELLECTUALS</p> <p><i>Develop your students as a community of warrior-scholars</i></p> <p>Inquiry: There is no "right answer," questioning, evidence, students as sources of knowledge</p> <p>Collective Accountability: Classroom as intellectual community</p> <p>Code Switching: Academic language and discussion formats</p> <p>Intellectual Challenge: High-level multicultural texts, complex problems, big ideas, less is more</p>	<p>KNOWLEDGE OF STUDENTS</p> <p><i>Start where your students are, not where you want/imagine them to be</i></p> <p>Prior Knowledge: What do students know? What are their experiences, preconceptions?</p> <p>Student Voice: What do students care about? What do they think? (Examples of activities like sort, chalk talk, dot voting, etc.)</p> <p>Individual Needs: Differentiation without tracking, adjusting instruction based on formative assessment</p> <p>Choice: Students have real choices about how and what they learn</p>
<p>SAFE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY</p> <p><i>Protect your students in a potentially dangerous world</i></p> <p>Prevention: Clear expectations, talk about values, Teacher Voice, One Mic</p> <p>Rituals: Mindfulness, Talking Circle, Strong Start, Strong Finish</p> <p>Jedi Awareness and Control the Mood: Be aware of the class culture and respond proactively</p> <p>Intervention: Assume positive intent, keep it in perspective, deliberate escalation, when to stop the curriculum and when/how to remove students</p>	<p>TEACHER AS COACH</p> <p><i>Let your students do the work</i></p> <p>Metacognition: Students should know how they learn and how to self-assess</p> <p>Academic Skills: Binders, annotations, note-taking skills, etc.</p> <p>Culture of Revision and Practice: Models of excellent work, multiple revisions, guided practice</p> <p>Teamwork: Heterogeneous groups, clear roles, focus on the process, address status</p>	<p>SOCIAL JUSTICE CURRICULUM</p> <p><i>Teach a curriculum that helps students understand the real world</i></p> <p>Clear Purpose: Students know what they are doing and why it matters</p> <p>Relevance: Curriculum helps explain the real world and oppression (including multicultural curriculum, community connections, and cross-curricular connections)</p> <p>Encourage Dissenting Opinions: Critical thinking is the goal</p> <p>Human Values: Curriculum grounded in justice, fairness, dignity, and cultural strengths</p>

Source: Provided by Matt Alexander, who served as principal at June Jordan School for Equity from 2006–2018 and worked with staff to develop and use this framework for professional development and teaching practice there.

Additional Resources

Professional Learning

- [EdPrepLab](#), Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education: This collaborative initiative aims to strengthen educator preparation in the United States by building the collaborative capacity of preparation programs, school districts, and state policymakers.
- [Effective Teacher Professional Development](#), Learning Policy Institute: This report reviews 35 methodologically rigorous studies that have demonstrated a positive link between teacher professional development, teaching practices, and student outcomes. It identifies features of these approaches and offers descriptions of these models to inform those seeking to understand how to foster successful strategies.
- [Lead by Learning](#), Mills College at Northeastern University: Lead by Learning provides resources and support for adult learning and collaboration. Their signature practice, “Public Learning,” enables teachers to improve instruction by collaboratively exploring dilemmas of practice—in contrast to the more typical professional development approach of highlighting and displaying an educator’s most successful teaching practices as a model.
- [Learning Forward: The Professional Learning Organization](#): Learning Forward is the only professional association devoted exclusively to educator professional learning. This website offers multiple resources for designing and guiding effective job-embedded professional learning.
- [Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning](#), Linda Darling-Hammond and Jeannie Oakes: This book describes programs in which teacher candidates learn to create personalized, inquiry-based learning opportunities for all children. Through interviews, on-site observations, candidate surveys, and document review, the authors describe the curriculum, practices, and institutional structures that make teacher preparation for deeper learning possible.
- [reDesign](#): This site offers resources for educators, districts, and state leaders to foster learner-centered communities. The organization also offers consulting services for school and system redesign.
- [Teaching Profession Playbook](#), Partnership for the Future of Learning: This report provides numerous examples of educator preparation programs, including teacher residencies and Grow Your Own programs embedded in school districts. It also highlights other key strategies for recruitment and retention of effective educators, providing detailed examples in each area.
- [Toolkit: Connected Professional Learning for Teachers](#), ERS: This toolkit covers strategic practices, how to organize resources, and where to get started to shift school systems to engage teachers in effective connected professional learning.
- [Transcend](#): This organization offers professional development for school communities to develop equitable learning environments. They offer virtual workshops, cohorts, and fellowships.

Teacher Collaboration Time

- [Finding Time for Collaboration](#), Mary Anne Raywid, ASCD: This resource compiles 15 examples of creative ways that schools throughout the country have made or found time for shared reflection and collaboration among teachers.
- [Finding Time for Collaborative Planning](#), David Rosenberg, Rob Daigneau, and Melissa Galvez, ERS: This resource highlights six strategies for finding sufficient time for collaboration.
- [It's About Time: Organizing Schools for Teacher Collaboration and Learning](#), Soung Bae, Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education: This report details the benefits and challenges of creating time and capacity for teacher collaboration and shared learning, along with detailing how Hillsdale High School redesigned its master schedule to facilitate the school's collective mission and goals to support collaboration and relationships.



Feature 8: Authentic Family Engagement

“A student-led conference lets us [students] know that we have to tell the truth for our teachers to help us and at the same time our parents, to see if they can find a way to help us with the teacher together.”

—Student at Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School¹³⁰

What Students Need

While educator quality is critical to student success, educators cannot do it alone, and their most important partners, aside from students themselves, are students’ families and caregivers. Family engagement is a priority in many elementary schools, but it is difficult to sustain in most traditional secondary schools when there are few opportunities for teachers and families to meet or talk on a regular basis. Middle schools and high schools are typically designed to focus on teaching content rather than taking into account the whole child, including the family. Yet adolescence is a critical time in brain development and social-emotional growth—a time when it is more important than ever for educators and caregivers to be on the same page. Research shows that authentic family engagement can improve attendance rates, create a more positive school climate, and increase academic achievement.¹³¹

Differences between the norms and expectations of home and school can lead to serious disjunctures that cause students to fail in school. If educators do not have the advantage of parents’ knowledge about their children, they may miss important elements that could inform teaching. If parents do not know what the school expects and needs from their children and from them, it is difficult for them to respond in supportive ways. Just as strong teacher–student relationships can provide students with invaluable support, so too are solid partnerships between teachers and families a key component of student success.

Part of the difficulty in creating strong family–school connections is that parents often do not feel welcome at school, especially in secondary schools. Many have vivid memories of their own negative experiences in school. Usually, the school contacts them only to tell them that their child is in trouble: Teachers who call home with positive news are the exception, not surprisingly, given their typical pupil loads and lack of planning time. And when parents do make an effort to reach the school, they must negotiate the difficulties of contacting multiple teachers, counselors, deans, and assistant principals, quite often without reaching anyone who knows very much about their child.

Key Practices

Communication With Families

Schools that have been redesigned to build connections between educators, students, and families enable educators to better support young people and tailor their teaching to individual needs. This process begins with prioritizing **regular, positive communication** with families—a simple step that goes a long way to building trust and making families feel welcome.

This kind of personal communication is a challenge if schools have not redesigned their **structures for personalization**, as described in [Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships](#). A teacher with a pupil load of 150 cannot realistically call most parents on a regular basis. It becomes more feasible for a teacher in a small learning community with block scheduling who carries a smaller pupil load, and even more so for a teacher-advisor in an advisory system who is the primary point of parent contact for 15–20 students. Looping also allows teachers to get to know parents over time and build the trust required for meaningful partnership. Therese Arsenault, founding middle school math and science teacher at Gateway Public Schools, explained the expectations she can fulfill to a small group of students:

There's a real intention [at our school] of getting to know families: seeing the family as a partner, reaching out at the beginning of the year with, "Hi, my name is ...," and really talking about what [you have] noticed has gone well with this student so you establish that we're all advocates. We're on the same page. There [are] also a lot of phone calls and emails that go back and forth between us and our students. Then, ... [during] the first [student-led] conference of the year, ... you're really trying to establish the relationship with the parent and the child at that same time.¹³²

Then parents are encouraged to be in touch when they have questions, information, or needs. A parent at City Arts and Technology High School in San Francisco—a school with a well-developed system of advisories and teaching teams—explained how this kind of communication makes them feel:

You call, email, text, whatever method they give you to get in contact with them, and the teachers use it. They check it. They answer it. That's my personal experience. I have not contacted any of my son's teachers or principal without an immediate answer, and that's pretty sweet.¹³³

Parents or caregivers fluent in languages other than English often report that they want to support their students' learning but cannot communicate with teachers who do not speak their language. At the secondary level, schools often rely on students themselves to interpret; however, while this is often useful, it can sometimes create a challenging dynamic for parents and their children. Effective schools serving students who speak a home language other than English build language capacity by prioritizing hiring **staff who speak parents' native languages**, so parents feel respected and welcomed in the community. In California, state law requires schools where more than 15% of families speak a particular language to provide all written notices to parents and guardians in that language as well as English. Family-connected schools also provide oral interpretation at schoolwide events and meetings. For languages with smaller populations, schools often set aside funding to pay for

Effective schools serving students who speak a home language other than English build language capacity by prioritizing hiring staff who speak parents' native languages, so parents feel respected and welcomed in the community.

phone-based interpretation services that teachers can access when needed. No matter the language, all important documents, such as Individualized Education Plans, are translated in advance so that parents can participate as full partners in their child's education.

Flexibility is essential in connecting with all caregivers, especially those with fewer economic means, who care deeply about their children's academic success but often face significant barriers to providing the levels of support that middle-class families can provide. Parents often work multiple jobs, and their work hours can be irregular and lack flexibility, requiring them to show up with little notice or risk losing employment. When work is not available, accessing government aid requires long hours of navigating complex bureaucracies. In many places, public transit is unreliable. If educators interpret these barriers as indicating that families do not care about their children, they are playing into harmful stereotypes.

Effective schools serving students from low-income families respond with flexibility, offering meetings at flexible times and in varying ways. When they host meetings at school, schools welcome parents with food and child care—and if the school is not near where families live or work, educators offer to come to locations that are convenient for parents, such as places of worship or community centers. They use multiple means of communication as well: telephone, email, web postings and chats, and text messages.

One California superintendent noted that, when school sites were closed during the pandemic, he began to offer online informational meetings to families. Whereas usually only a couple of dozen families were able to show up to traditional back-to-school nights, he had more than 2,000 parents and other family members attending these online sessions, which he decided then to continue when schools were physically back in session.

Home Visits

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many educators took it upon themselves to visit student homes to deliver laptops and hotspots so their students could access virtual learning. But home visits need not only be a response to a crisis: Planned home visits are a research-based approach to building positive teacher–parent relationships at the secondary level. Not only do home visits build trust and engage families, but they also help teachers learn about parents' goals for their children and provide an important learning experience for teachers who do not come from the same communities as their students. When families are uncomfortable having a visit in their home, the visit can be arranged in another community-based location, such as a library, recreation center, or coffee shop.

Some schools make it a practice to organize home or school visits and positive calls home from advisors early in the school year to establish a productive relationship in which both partners are sharing and learning with each other; educators can learn about their students' histories, interests, and needs, and families can learn about the school's approach and how they can support their child. The schools create explicit room in the schedule and/or set aside funds to pay for extra hours for advisors to conduct home visits or school-based meetings with caregivers early in the school year so that the relationships can get off to a trusting start.

As with many family engagement strategies, home visits become feasible with redesigned school structures such as advisories. East Palo Alto Academy High School, for example, organizes family–teacher meetings conducted by advisors with the families of their 15–20 advisees within the first 2 months of each school

year. These may be in homes or other settings in the community, or if the families prefer, they can be held at school. Teacher time is planned and compensated. Advisors share information about their advisees with other teachers and become a key coordinator of information and supports for these students.¹³⁴

Educators at Oakland International High School participate in Parent–Teacher Home Visits,¹³⁵ an approach to home visits supported by a national nonprofit that has been shown to be effective for engaging families, informing teachers, and mitigating bias across cultural, racial, and linguistic lines.¹³⁶ Under this model, home visits are voluntary for educators. In addition, all students in a class are eligible for a home visit—there is no targeting of specific students or families—and teachers are trained and compensated for their time. Educators visit families in pairs and start each visit with a focus on hopes, dreams, and goals to establish a positive relationship grounded in shared values. They frame the visit as the beginning of a relationship rather than a one-time engagement.

Family Involvement

Authentic partnerships with parents and guardians, in which their expertise is tapped, can lead to mutually supportive practices at home and school. Parents can offer observations about students’ strategies, pace, and style of learning; their different strengths and experiences; the ways they express what they know; and the kinds of teaching strategies that are effective for them. When teachers’ insights are supported by parents’ insights, teachers can more easily connect students’ experiences to curriculum goals. In addition to engaging parents around their own children’s learning, teachers in successful schools invite parents to visit classrooms and provide feedback on how the school can create the most effective learning environment possible for all students.

Conferences With Caregivers and Students. Student-led parent–teacher conferences have become an increasingly common practice in elementary schools, and they are effective at the secondary level as well. (See the [Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School profile](#) at the end of this chapter.) In middle and high schools, these conferences are usually managed by the students’ advisors and are often integrated into performance assessment systems. Students select work from their portfolios or examples of their exhibitions and explain to their parents what they have learned, why it matters, and how it connects to their postsecondary goals. These conversations not only allow parents to see students’ academic work and help them understand what is happening in school, but they also provide students with the opportunity to take ownership of their learning and share pride in their accomplishments. As needed for caregivers who speak a language other than English, these conferences are conducted with translation services for the teacher and/or caregiver.

During students’ final year of high school, conferences provide a space where students and parents can discuss concrete **postsecondary plans**. In situations in which a student would be the first member of their family to attend college, educators can work with parents to support the university application and financial aid processes, which are difficult to navigate even when one has been through them before. No matter what a student plans to do after graduation, leaving high school can be a stressful transition, and conferences during senior year allow the student and their family to slow down and have a focused and intentional conversation about the future, including potential challenges and opportunities for support.

Some schools go a step beyond conferences and develop **Academic Parent–Teacher Teams**, a practice in which each teacher hosts three meetings a year with the families of all the teacher’s students together. At the secondary level, these meetings could occur in an advisory or within a small learning community.

Unlike a traditional back-to-school night, where teachers just present information, Academic Parent-Teacher Team meetings are collaborative sessions where teachers and parents together look at trends in student performance and examples of student work, so parents are better prepared to support their children's learning.

Family Services. Another strategy for welcoming families into the school community is running family literacy or continuing education programs (or partnering with community agencies that run such programs at the school) to provide useful services to families. Families who attend such activities at the school during school hours get to know teachers and other school staff and feel more comfortable talking with teachers about their children's education.¹³⁷ (See [Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports](#).)

One example of this kind of partnership is the Multigenerational Afterschool Arts Program at the UCLA Community School, where every Wednesday afternoon family members, students, and a local teaching artist coconstruct a curriculum that “engages 30–40 students of all ages in making art that honors their home culture and lived experience as immigrants.” For example, as fears of deportation intensified after the 2016 election, the group created a quilt representing what sanctuary meant to them; the quilt now hangs in the school's Immigrant Family Legal Clinic.¹³⁸

Another example is the Parent Center at Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez) in Los Angeles, where parents and community members can take and teach classes on their interests, sign up to volunteer at the school, and connect with members of the school and broader community. As a school study noted:

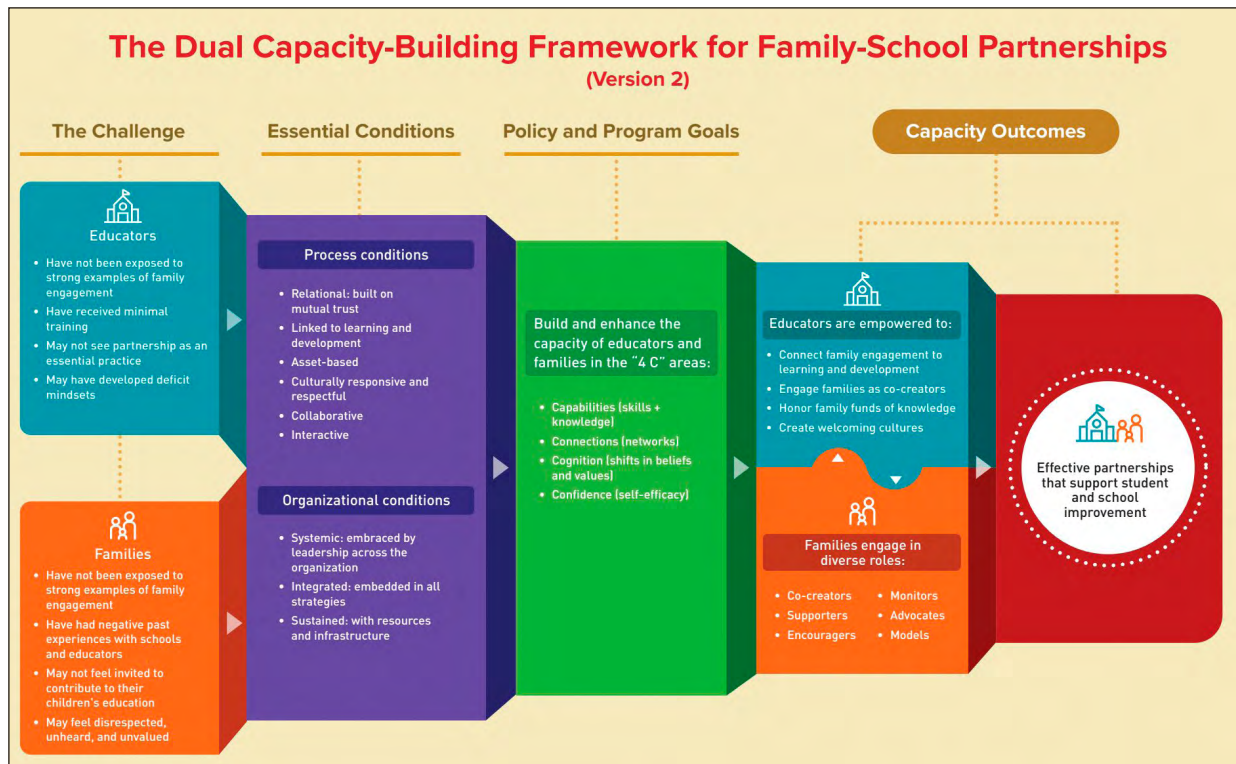
Mendez's robust parent programming provides ample opportunities for families to engage with the school. To foster a love of literacy among parents, which was identified as a goal during a recent needs assessment, the director of the Parent Center—herself a parent—leads a book club. The school also hosts regular Zumba classes, trains parents as *promotoras* (health advocates), and provides opportunities for parents to teach and learn *manualidades* (crafts). These options open the campus up to parents in a variety of capacities, from volunteering in classrooms to full leadership positions, which helps Mendez deliver on its original goal of being a community hub.¹³⁹

Once communication and relationships are built between educators and families, they can begin to partner to create the best possible learning conditions not just for individual young people but also for the school as a whole. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships is a useful resource for developing meaningful partnerships on a schoolwide level. (See [Figure 10](#).) The framework recognizes that both families and educators bring skills, knowledge, and social capital to the table and that everyone involved must feel confident in taking on leadership and be committed to authentic partnership across roles.

Once communication and relationships are built between educators and families, they can begin to partner to create the best possible learning conditions not just for individual young people but also for the school as a whole.

In a broader sense, family–school connections are essential because they place education where it belongs—at the heart of the community. Unlike the traditional factory-model school representing a faceless system, the redesigned school has the potential to be an integral part of the neighborhoods it serves—and even to help build community in those neighborhoods around the critical goal of education.

Figure 10. Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships



Source: Mapp, K. L., & Bergman, E. (2019). Dual capacity-building framework for family–school partnerships (Version 2).

School Profile: Family Participation at Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School



Photo provided by NYC Outward Bound Schools.

Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS), a public PreK–12 school within the New York City Department of Education, grounds its mission in its work with families. Located in Washington Heights, the school serves approximately 950 students, of whom 93% identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, 88% are from low-income families, 24% are identified for special education, and 14% are English learners. Its mission statement reads:

Our mission is to work with families to prepare each student academically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially to succeed in the college of their choice and beyond. We provide a small, nurturing environment where high expectations, excellent instruction, and dedicated faculty work relentlessly to meet the needs of all students. Consider our school if you strive to become a skilled problem-solver, effective communicator, adventurous risk-taker, and an active contributor to the school and local community. Our high expectations coupled with our commitment to creating a sense of membership and belonging for all students is why so many of our students are fulfilling our mission, graduating from college and pursuing meaningful careers.

And indeed, 92% of WHEELS students graduate from high school within 4 years, and 76% go on to college or career pathways. WHEELS is part of the NYC Outward Bound Schools network that uses a model created by EL Education that focuses on character and high-quality work along with mastery of knowledge and skills. The school's mission is based on four principles:

1. Instruction and assessment that challenge, engage, and empower learners
2. Access to standards-based, content-rich, culturally affirming curriculum
3. School culture that fosters positive identity, belonging, agency, and purpose
4. Explicit anti-racist discussion, practice, and action

Support for rigorous project-based learning and for connections with families both start with “**Crew**”—the advisory structure in which 15 students and a Crew leader (teacher or other member of professional staff) meet 4 days per week. Crew includes academic advising, individual goal setting, character development, and explicit teaching of study skills. In Crew, students learn to take responsibility for their learning and develop mentoring relationships with adults and peers. Crew leaders are responsible for tracking and supporting the behavioral and academic success of students and maintaining strong communication with families, serving as the primary point of contact for a student’s family regarding all school-related matters. Crew leaders develop strong relationships with families and contact them regarding students’ attendance, academics, and social-emotional and physical well-being through calls, emails, and meetings throughout the year.

Part of that communication includes **student-led conferences** three times each year, at which students present to their families and Crew leader selected work products and reflect on their growth and next steps. In student-led conferences, all students also reflect on WHEELS Habits of Work and Learning (responsibility, craftsmanship, perseverance, and curiosity) and Community Values (integrity, collaboration, respect, and compassion).

At his first student-led conference in 10th grade, Rafael discussed his progress with his Crew leader and his mother, who this year was happy to have all three of her children at WHEELS. He began by introducing himself to his mother, which occasioned laughter all around. He had chosen two pieces of work to present and reflect on. The first was a global history thematic essay for which he had to use a set of documents to investigate and write an essay on a theme dealing with “economic systems.” In reflecting on the process of producing the essay, he noted that, at one point, “I kind of lost track of how to do it, but then we had a lesson on that, and I got it down.”

The second was a piece of work from his AP Spanish Literature course, in which Rafael confessed he was struggling. Fluent in Spanish, he noted that “it was surprising, because I thought it would be like last year’s [Spanish] class.” His Crew leader, who was his Spanish teacher the year before, noted that this class was different because “it’s very literature-based.” Rafael agreed that “the text is difficult,” but he continued, “It’s hard but I know I can do it because I’m that kind of student who doesn’t give up so easily,” voicing perseverance, one of WHEELS Habits of Work. He and his mother discussed how important it is to ask for support when needed, and his Crew leader volunteered to take a look at the texts with him.

As they were setting goals, Rafael noted, “I don’t like to make mistakes. Last year, me and my mom had a goal for me so that I would stop having a fear of being wrong in front of the whole class.” His mother added, “Just take the risk and raise your hand and be wrong once in a while. That’s a strategy to learn.” Rafael agreed. Later, in reflecting on the value of the student-led conference, Rafael noted that it allowed both his teachers and his mother to support him in his work: “A student-led conference,” he noted, “lets us [students] know that we have to tell the truth for our teachers to help us and at the same time our parents, to see if they can find a way to help us with the teacher together.” The partnership between families and educators at the school is a key ingredient in the ultimate success of the students. As Rafael’s mother said with emotion after the conference, “I see that they’re going to pull these kids to be a complete success, and as a parent I have no words to thank them.”

Sources: EL Education. (2012). *High school student-led conference* [Video]; [Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School](#).

Additional Resources

Communicating With Families

- [3 Ways for Schools to Engage Families of Older Students](#), Edutopia: This web page provides links to videos and resources that can help practitioners develop strategies that better engage families of older students.
- [4 Ways to Improve Communications With Families](#), Edutopia: This article describes tips and resources that can support educators in building strong communication with students' families.
- [The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#), Karen L. Mapp and Eyal Bergman: This framework was designed to help districts and schools chart a path toward effective family engagement efforts.
- [Making Families Feel Welcome](#), Greater Good in Education: This brief reflection activity for school staff lists methods for making students' families feel valued and respected.
- [SEL With Families & Caregivers](#), Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): This web page explores partnership opportunities and two-way communication that invites families to participate in planning processes and support social and emotional learning.

Home Visits

- [Parent Teacher Home Visits](#): This web page compiles resources for educators, families, and communities to help implement home visit programs, including tools for getting started, training, and outreach.
- [Virtual Home Visits: Building Essential Relationships](#), Stand for Children: This web page includes a guide and an app designed to make virtual home visits easier.



Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports

“I think what makes us a community school is ... acknowledging that the things that happen outside of our doors will also happen inside of our doors. ... We have a responsibility to interact with the world outside of the campus, being not only a resource for the entire community and for the families that are here, but also looking to them as a resource, because we know that the best knowledge and the best practices that will help a community solve its issues are probably also in the community.”

—Staff member at Social Justice Humanitas Academy¹⁴⁰

What Students Need

The COVID-19 crisis only exacerbated the dramatic and growing economic inequality in our nation. More than half of public school students now live in low-income households, and these young people are living with the consequences of long-term disinvestment not only in our public schools but also in the social safety net, which used to provide more robust supports for struggling families. The more we know about brain development, the more we understand how much human beings need safe and nurturing environments and multiple supports for health and well-being to support development and learning. Unfortunately, with high levels of poverty, food and housing insecurity, lack of health care, and social violence, all too many young people today experience adverse conditions for development. These conditions produce high levels of continuous stress that undermine their ability to learn and grow in a healthy manner. If this stress is not addressed, and the situation causing the stress is not mitigated, it is much harder for students to succeed academically.

Schools cannot educate students effectively without attending to their other needs as well—including access to stable housing, healthy food, mental and physical health services, and the technology required for 21st-century learning. One important way to do this is by working in partnership with others in the community. Through trusting relationships and well-coordinated support, schools can ensure that students receive the health, social service, and learning opportunities they need to be successful. Evidence shows such structures can lead to improvements in students’ attendance, academic achievement, and high school graduation rates and to reduced racial and economic achievement gaps.¹⁴¹

Through trusting relationships and well-coordinated support, schools can ensure that students receive the health, social service, and learning opportunities they need to be successful.

For a school to work with the community, its staff must know the community it serves—its multiple cultures; its families, youth-serving and other organizations, and social patterns; and the cultural and other strengths that exist and could be assets for the school. Connecting deeply with the community is only possible when school staff have developed relationships with community leaders that are rooted in mutual trust and accountability. When such relationships take root, the school can truly become a center of the community.

Key Practices

Knowledge of the Community

Building strong community relationships can take years. Retaining teachers and principals matters a great deal, as does recruiting educators from the community and actively seeking out leaders and organizations with whom to partner. Teachers and school leaders who come from the community are well positioned to build the necessary connections, and parents or extended family members of students can also be key bridge-builders in this process. Educators who come from other communities or backgrounds need to listen and learn with humility. Schools can then become places for the community to celebrate its strengths, both through cultural programs and partnerships with local community initiatives.

In Practice: Learning About and From the Community

Oakland International High School, a part of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, which serves immigrant students, has a long history of connections with the communities it serves. To ensure those ties keep growing, the school engages in annual **community walks**. These learning walks take most of a day and are led by students and parents from each of the community's major cultural and linguistic groups; the school's staff are the learners. Community walks often include a discussion of families' immigration experiences, followed by visits to key locations in the community (which could range from a corner where day laborers look for work to a cultural center or faith institution), and finishing with a meal either prepared by families or in a local restaurant. Students, parents, and community leaders share about their lives and cultures and educate the staff about what they need and want from the school.

Another example of learning from the community is the Native American Community Academy (NACA), a K–12 public school in Albuquerque, NM. Over 70% of NACA's students are Native American, and the school partners with local community leaders and groups to offer programs in which the academic classroom curriculum is combined with youth service to strengthen the community for the common good. The Cultural Service Learning Program, for example, is grounded in important **cultural practices** such as Horno oven building and repair, sheep shearing and wool preparation, weaving, drum making, pow wow instruction, and traditional clothing/regalia. And because language is so connected to culture, NACA teaches five Native American languages—Keres, Lakota, Navajo, Tiwa, and Zuni. Several of these languages are currently spoken by very few people, mostly older adults, and NACA's students, with the support of the school, play an important role in preserving the cultural wealth of their communities.

Sources: Safir, S. (2017, March 23). *Community walks create bonds of understanding* [Blog]. *Edutopia*; Bajaj, M. (2016). *Community walks: A day of learning for schools*. Learning for Justice; Native American Community Academy.

Community Schools

Community schools are rooted in our understanding of how people learn. In such schools, a community school coordinator works to orchestrate multiple community resources; community leaders and families become close partners of the school; and the staff is organized to ensure that students get access to resources they need.

The community schools framework was developed to describe such schools that serve as community hubs and partner with community organizations to educate the whole child. The framework builds on a synthesis of more than 140 studies that found that effective community schools that boost attendance, achievement, and attainment are guided by four key pillars: integrated student supports; family and community engagement; collaborative leadership and practices; and expanded learning time and opportunities.¹⁴² Since the publication of the original research, two more dimensions have been added to communicate the ways that school climate and instruction should reinforce the goals of student support: culture of belonging, safety, and care and rigorous community-connected classroom instruction. (See [Figure 11.](#))

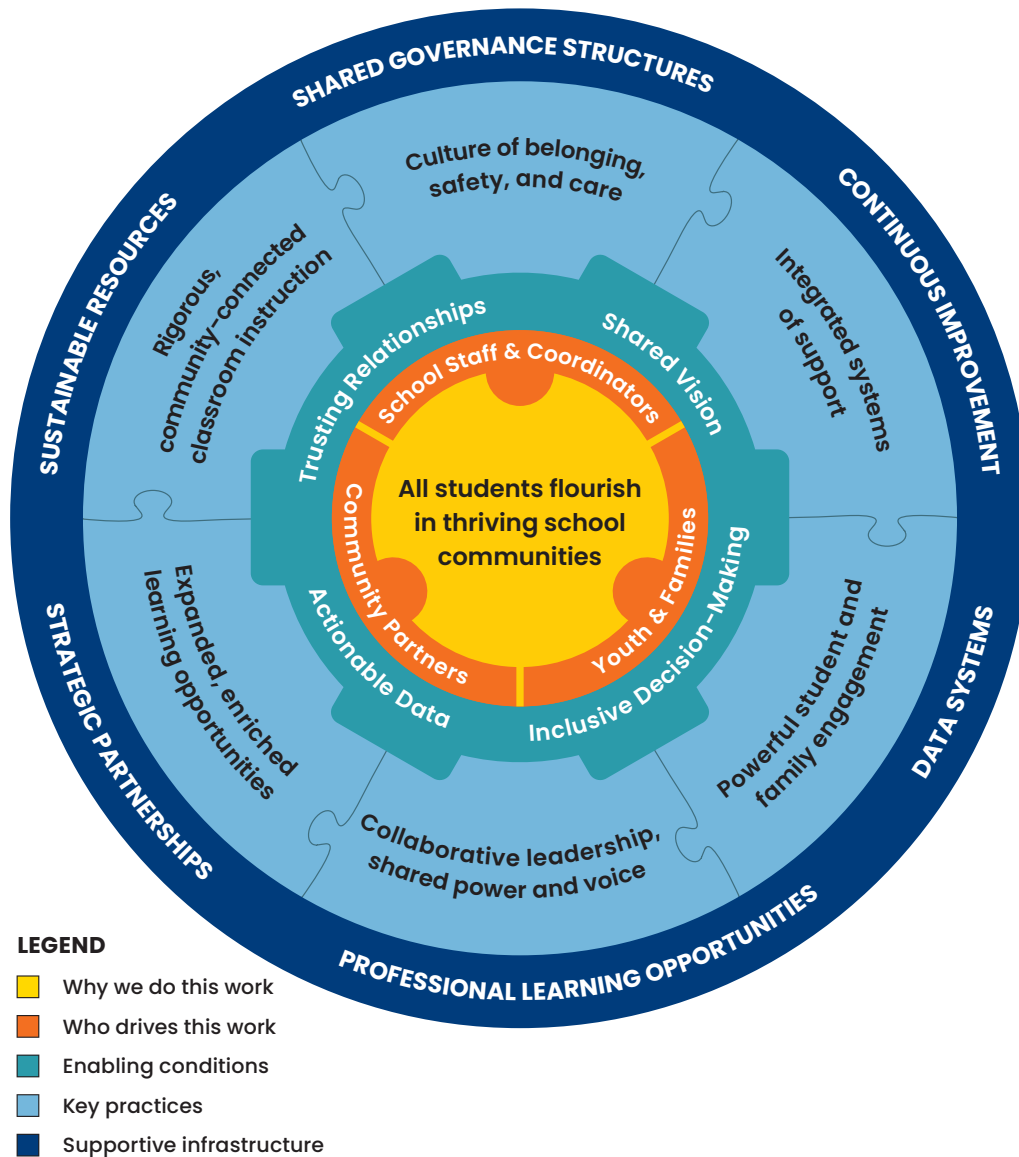
These elements can take different forms across community schools because each school designs its program to meet the needs of its students and families, using the community's assets as a starting point. In effective community schools, families, students, community leaders, and school staff collaborate on a comprehensive needs assessment, on design and planning of the program, and on its implementation.

A culture of belonging, safety, and care is developed in the ways we have described in this volume, through the use of structures for relationships, such as advisories and looping; explicit attention to social and emotional learning and restorative approaches; and a focus on culturally responsive and sustaining practices.

Integrated student supports, or wraparound services, bring together school-based and community-based resources to ensure that students receive the support they need to be able to learn, whether they need mental health services, physical health services, housing or food assistance for their family, or other supports. While many of these services are not provided by the school itself, the school becomes the resource hub, which allows students and families to receive services more efficiently (rather than navigating multiple bureaucracies on their own) and ensures that service providers and school staff can collaborate to support children, using a holistic, assets-based approach.

The supports provided in each community vary. When the Native American Community Academy in Albuquerque heard from its community that there was a need for wellness services provided through an Indigenous lens, the school developed a “Wellness Wheel” that students and staff could use to reflect on their own wellness practices in four areas—intellectual, physical, social-emotional, and community/relationship wellness—and then access services based on their needs. One of the school's most popular supports is the Eagle Room, a culturally based space where students, staff, or family members can engage in self-reflection, meditation, or prayer, either during or after school. The school also partners with the First Nations School-Based Health Center—which specializes in culturally competent health care for the Native American community—to offer on-campus physical health, mental health, and dental services to students, families, and staff, free of charge and with no copayment.¹⁴³

Figure 11. Essentials for Community School Transformation



Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023). *Framework: Essentials for community school transformation*.

In the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, the RFK Community Schools campus houses six schools on the former site of the Ambassador Hotel, where Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1968. Because the schools serve many immigrant families, the UCLA School of Law runs a comprehensive immigration legal clinic on the campus, providing “know your rights” training and materials, legal consultations, and full legal representation. Leyda Garcia, principal of the UCLA Community School, explains that the presence of the legal clinic complements the school’s curricular and other efforts to make students and families feel safe by honoring students’ immigrant origins: “Our families know that we are looking out for them.”¹⁴⁴ **Powerful student and family engagement** is accomplished through these kinds of focused services as well as the strategies for communication, involvement, and decision-making described in [Feature 8: Authentic Family Engagement](#) and [Feature 10: Shared Decision-Making and Leadership](#).

Collaborative decision-making is a key aspect of successful partnerships. When these community partnerships are implemented effectively, people and organizations from across the community come together and learn together how best to support students and families so that students are healthier and learn more and the school feels like the heart of the community. UCLA Community School founding lead teacher Rosa Jimenez explains how the community schools approach dovetails with a student-centered pedagogy and other features of effective secondary schools, including shared decision-making:

When these community partnerships are implemented effectively, people and organizations from across the community come together and learn together how best to support students and families so that students are healthier and learn more and the school feels like the heart of the community.

The fundamental difference [between a traditional school and a community school] is a commitment to democratic practices. We are constantly trying to figure out how to make decisions and problem-solve in a way that includes as many voices as possible. We've tried to flip the school hierarchy on its head and move away from traditional ideas of how a student learns and how teachers should think about their work. It allows for a lot of collaboration and a lot of decision-making and problem-solving using real data. ... We get to know our students and community and try to be responsive to those needs.¹⁴⁵

Expanded and enriched learning time allows for students to pursue their academic interests on a deeper level or to receive additional academic support where they need it. Some schools collaborate with volunteer programs to secure tutors who can assist students with reading, writing, and math skills. Others use peer tutoring or faculty assistance to provide additional help to struggling students. Enrichment opportunities can include independent study or small group projects; activities like robotics or music or art; cultural clubs; college and career preparation activities; or community service and internships. All of these can be led by, or conducted in partnership with, community leaders and organizations. Some of the best mentors for young people do not work in schools, and the opportunity to learn from a community-based professional or nonprofit leader may be one of the most important experiences a young person has during high school.

Community schools not only address social-emotional and socioeconomic barriers to learning; they also build in time for accelerating and differentiating learning to meet individual students' needs. This can happen through one-on-one or small group tutoring or mentoring, or through supported homework time. This kind of expanded and enriched learning can happen in many configurations—elective periods during the school day, after-school programs, and summer programs, among others. Along with supports for engaging approaches to literacy and math learning, many community schools offer robust elective programs where students are encouraged to pursue different interests, from cooking to coding, from Dungeons and Dragons to disc golf. Rather than leaving such pursuits solely in the realm of student clubs, where only some students may access them, community schools create opportunities and expectations for all students to participate.

Community-connected learning is one outcome of this collaborative approach. This can take the form of projects in the community that support inquiry into community conditions and needs or that beautify or contribute to the community's assets. It can also take the form of experiential learning in the community, through internships, civic engagement, or service learning. When students see how the math, science, and social studies content they are learning connects to their community—and when their efforts can help improve the welfare of others—they both see the relevance of schoolwork and develop their own sense of personal and social responsibility.

In Practice: Community Schools and Linked Learning

As one way to be responsive to the needs of students and their communities, Oakland Unified School District adopted [Linked Learning](#) in all high schools as part of its districtwide community schools initiative. This resulted in the number of Oakland high school students in Linked Learning pathways going from 49% in 2014 to 88% in 2020.

Though the Linked Learning and community schools approaches are separate district initiatives, they share similar aims. Both prioritize incorporating authentic, community-based learning strategies; using integrated supports to mitigate out-of-school barriers to learning and to increase the relevance and rigor of curriculum and instruction; and leveraging the expertise of community interest holders to improve learning and workplace environments for students (see [Feature 4: Deeper Learning Curriculum](#)). Because of their shared aims, the Linked Learning and community school approaches can be implemented in integrative ways so that each approach supports and reinforces the other. For example, the development of Linked Learning pathways at Oakland High School restructured the school from a large, comprehensive high school into a group of small learning communities, each organized around a different career theme enacted with local industry and community partners. In-school curriculum and out-of-school internships are linked to these themes and settings, making learning more meaningful for students and more connected to the community. Furthermore, each of these small learning communities is directed by its own leadership team that includes a case manager and a counselor. These teams meet regularly to identify students who are facing challenges, making it difficult for students to fall through the cracks.

In this way, the Linked Learning pathways support the community schools approach by enabling staff to more effectively identify students in need of support and connect those students with school resources. Similarly, the infrastructure that supports the community schools approach in place at Oakland High School reinforces the success of the Linked Learning pathways. Since Oakland Unified School District began its districtwide community schools effort in 2011, suspension rates have dropped by more than half; graduation rates have increased significantly, especially for Black and Latino/a students; and performance on state tests has increased as well, including during the pandemic years, when most districts were experiencing declines. (See [Feature 3: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching](#) for a description of the community-connected curriculum in Oakland High School's Environmental Science Linked Learning Pathway.)

Source: Klevan, S., Daniel, J., Fehrer, K., & Maier, A. (2023). *Creating the conditions for children to learn: Oakland's districtwide community schools initiative*. Learning Policy Institute.

In sum, community school designs augment efforts to design relationship-centered schools that support deeper learning with connections to community organizations and assets that can further engage families and community organizations, creating the village that is needed to raise each young person.

School Profile: Connecting With the Community at Mendez High School



Photo by Pablo Aguilar.

Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez) in Los Angeles serves more than 1,000 students, 97% Latino/a and 94% from low-income families. The school was founded in 2009 through a community organizing effort in response to overcrowding at nearby schools and has deep ties to the Boyle Heights neighborhood. Community leaders proposed naming the school after the Mendez family, the plaintiffs in a landmark 1946 school desegregation case in Southern California that helped pave the way for the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision a decade later.

Mendez staff connect the school's history and name to its current vision of being a **community school**. Mendez's educational program is based around high expectations (including AP for all and computer science for all); an engaging, culturally relevant curriculum; smaller class sizes (27 students on average, versus 41—the average in nearby Los Angeles Unified School District schools); an emphasis on relationships; and support for high-quality educators (many of whom have also been Mendez parents). Mendez staff understand that they cannot prepare students effectively alone, and so the school works with more than 30 community partners in four priority areas: (1) health and wellness, (2) academic support and case management, (3) arts and enrichment, and

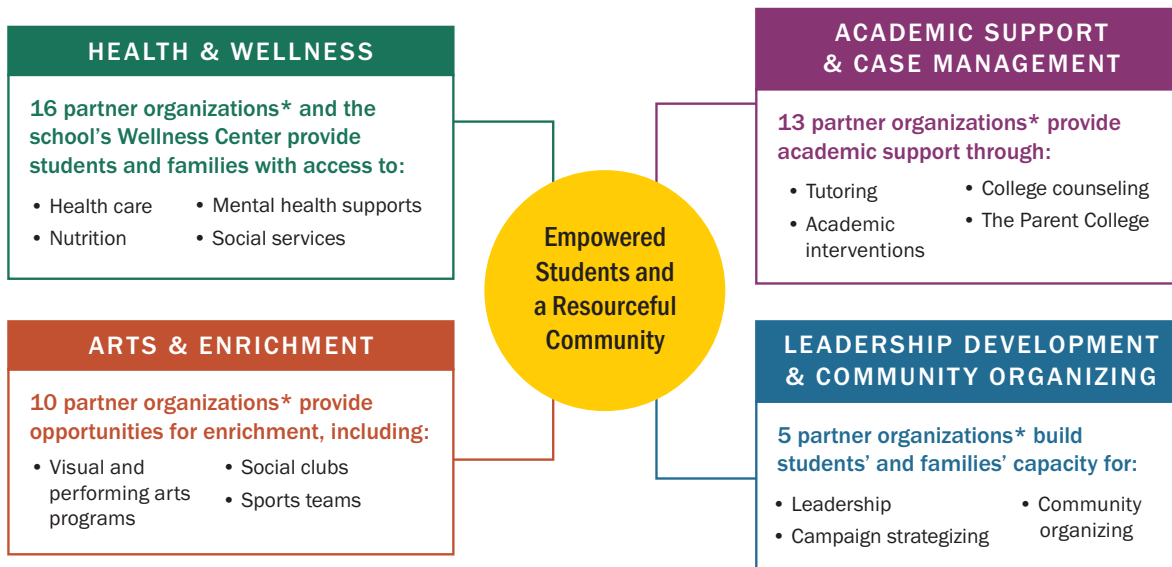
(4) leadership development and community organizing. Among the many organizations working with Mendez (see [Figure 12](#)), four are core partners whose staff work closely with the school's staff to support students and families:

- **Promesa Boyle Heights** is a collaborative of neighborhood organizations that provide Mendez students with academic case management, tutoring, and extracurricular clubs and classes ranging from Southeast Asian culture to fashion design and many others. Promesa also runs a *promatora* program through which community members learn health advocacy skills and do outreach to connect families with needed resources.
- The **Partnership for Los Angeles Schools** builds the capacity of Mendez staff through instructional coaching, strategic planning, and other leadership skills. The Partnership also supports Mendez's Parent Center and Parent College program, in which parents can learn to support their students and develop leadership skills. Finally, the Partnership helps Mendez conduct an annual needs assessment so staff can prioritize and ensure that both school- and community-based resources are meeting the needs of students and families.
- **Inner City Struggle** grew out of the Schools Not Jails youth movement in the 1990s in East Los Angeles and led the community organizing effort that resulted in the founding of Mendez. Now Inner City Struggle runs a leadership development program for students, and it still trains families and community members in community organizing—resulting recently in a successful campaign to build a neighborhood health and wellness center on the Mendez campus.
- **Communities In Schools of Los Angeles** provides case management for students and families by a licensed social worker, who identifies needs and provides referrals to services such as academic tutoring, counseling, and health and dental care. Sometimes individual interventions lead to changes in schoolwide practices: For example, Communities In Schools of Los Angeles staff began doing one-on-one check-ins with their 9th-grade clients near the end of the fall semester to see who needed academic support and suggested to Mendez staff that the practice be expanded so all students could access extra help quickly. Now every Mendez 9th-grader has three academic check-ins during the year with either a Mendez staff member or staff from a partner organization.

As the school's principal explains, these partnerships are reciprocal: "What happens in the school impacts the community, and what happens in the community impacts the school." Thus, the fact that Mendez has graduation and college-going rates of approximately 90%, and zero expulsions in the last decade, means that the surrounding Boyle Heights community is also a stronger place.

Figure 12. Partnerships and Priorities at Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School

Mendez cultivates deep and lasting relationships with its partners as part of its community school model. School staff leverage these partnerships to serve the school's goal to empower its students and support a resourceful community.



* Many partners provide services in multiple categories.

Source: Thompson, C. (2021). *Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School: A community school that honors its neighborhood's legacy of educational justice*. Learning Policy Institute.

Additional Resources

- [A School Year Like No Other Demands a New Learning Day: A Blueprint for How Afterschool Programs & Community Partners Can Help](#), Afterschool Alliance: This blueprint offers building blocks for school–community partnerships to address equity and coconstruct the learning day in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- [Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action](#), National Center for Community Schools: This guide provides information on several topics related to implementing and sustaining community schools, including key elements of community schools, models of community schools across the country, and case studies.
- [Coalition for Community Schools](#): This is an alliance of national, state, and local organizations in K–12 education, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government, and philanthropy. It offers a range of tools and resources that can help educational leaders to build and sustain community school models and initiatives in their area, including opportunities to connect with technical assistance providers that can help communities improve their planning and management.

- [Community Schools Playbook](#), Partnership for the Future of Learning: This playbook provides model legislation, real-world examples, and many additional resources for state and local leaders who want to support community schools.
- [The Community Schools Revolution](#), Martin Blank, Ira Harkavy, Jane Quinn, Lisa Villarreal, and David Goodman, Collaborative Communications Group: This free online book outlines the case for community schools, profiles six community schools and districts, and offers key lessons for community school efforts.
- [Community Schools Toolkit](#), Partnership for the Future of Learning: This resource provides tools, curricula, and step-by-step guides for practitioners, community members, students, and families to use and adapt to co-create community schools in their unique settings.
- [Financing Community Schools: A Framework for Growth and Sustainability](#), Partnership for the Future of Learning: This finance brief discusses community schools funding in depth. It provides a framework for financing community schools and examples of how community schools at varying stages of development can identify and implement financing strategies.
- [Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success, 2nd Edition](#), Heather L. Schwartz, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine H. Augustine, Jennifer T. Leschitz, RAND Corporation: Based on thousands of hours of observations, interviews, and surveys, this report provides guidance for district leaders and their partners for launching, improving, and sustaining effective summer learning programs.
- [Healthy Schools Campaign](#): The Healthy Schools Campaign aims to support schools in providing students with healthy environments, nutritious food, health services, and physical activity. HSC's resource center provides several tools that enable school districts, educators, and families to engage in this work, including advocacy guides and resources to incorporate health and wellness into schools.
- [Leading With Purpose and Passion: A Guide for Community School Directors](#), National Center for Community Schools: This printed guide provides practical advice and concrete resources for community school directors, with an emphasis on their leadership role in schools.
- [Rural Health Information Hub](#): The website contains a database of resources that can support practitioners who work in rural schools. Specifically, its resources can help leaders, educators, and other school-based personnel to build schools and systems that integrate services in ways that acknowledge and address the unique needs and infrastructure of rural communities.
- [Scale a Community School: A System-Wide Strategy](#), Coalition for Community Schools: This interactive guide is intended to support communities in planning, implementing, and sustaining a community schools strategy.
- [SEL in Communities](#), Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: This web page provides a list of resources for starting, supporting, and strengthening family-school partnerships, from accessible blogs and videos to interviews with veteran researchers.

- [Start a Community School](#), Coalition for Community Schools: This toolkit provides information on how to implement a community schools initiative and focuses on several topics, including vision and strategic planning, building a leadership team, needs and capacity assessments, sharing space and facilities, financing your community school, and research and evaluation.
- [What Are Community Schools?](#), Partnership for the Future of Learning: This video describes the four key features of community schools, the importance of community school coordinators, and strategies for funding community schools.



Feature 10: Shared Decision-Making and Leadership

“If you have an authoritarian, hierarchical school structure, the teacher becomes the information dispenser in the classroom. If kids are going to collaborate in classrooms, then teachers have to collaborate in decision-making.”

—Former New York City principal¹⁴⁶

What Students Need

Redesigning a school to reflect the features of successful schools described in this publication is a challenging process that requires the buy-in of the entire school community. Ongoing success of a redesigned school also depends on staff, students, and family members all understanding and supporting the community’s vision. This requires shared decision-making and leadership.

Research indicates that teacher participation in school decision-making is associated with greater retention for teachers and improved academic achievement for students.¹⁴⁷ There is also evidence that involvement of families and community members along with faculty also strengthens school climate and outcomes.¹⁴⁸ Authentic shared decision-making and leadership at the school level models the collaborative work that effective teachers expect from their students and enables schools to make significant improvements in their practices with the full endorsement and engagement of all members of the school community.

Moreover, at a moment in history when authoritarianism is on the rise, it is important for schools to model effective democratic processes, so young people grow up understanding the value of democracy, even when it is challenging to implement. Educator Deborah Meier reminds educators to remember the larger purpose of public schools:

How can we hope to educate for democracy if children and the adults in their lives never have the opportunity to observe or practice it? And if such an education doesn’t take place in our public schools, then where will it happen?¹⁴⁹

Key Practices

Shared Norms and Values

The first key element of an effective shared governance system is the development of **communitywide norms and values** that guide the work of teachers, parents, and students in making decisions. Working through these values is worth the time it takes to develop a strong consensus about what matters to members of the school community and what the goals for student learning and joint work will be. Students participate in developing and interpreting these norms and can rely on them to shape their daily experiences in school. (See [Feature 2: Safe, Inclusive School Climate](#).) Teachers can use these shared norms and values as touchstones when hiring colleagues, developing evaluation systems, engaging in peer review, making curriculum or professional development decisions, and setting standards for assessing student and teacher work.

These common values provide essential coherence to the educational program, as well as an important form of accountability, because educators, parents, or students can raise concerns when practices do not adhere to the norms.

Shared norms and values, when enacted in the context of **collaborative decision-making**, are the foundation for relational trust, which studies have found is essential for school improvement. A set of studies on 200 Chicago schools over a period of 7 years found, for example, that collaborative structures and activities were key to nurturing relational trust among teachers as well as between educators, parents, and community members.¹⁵⁰ As a part of this research, scholars found that partnerships among teachers, parents, and community members were important in providing the social resources needed to improve school conditions that influence student learning, including the learning climate and ambitious instruction. Chicago schools that were strong in these essential supports were at least 10 times more likely than schools weak in such supports to show substantial gains in both reading and math.

Shared norms and values, when enacted in the context of collaborative decision-making, are the foundation for relational trust.

Principals at effective schools are committed to enabling everyone to uphold the community's values and goals, but they do not try to take on this role alone; they reach out to others with expertise who can take the lead in many areas of the school's functioning. They follow the advice of community organizer Marshall Ganz, who says that leadership is "accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty."¹⁵¹ A principal who knows how to enable others to lead can create the space for teachers, parents, and students to create a common vision for where the school is going, and teachers can then make decisions that lead to student success. The ownership that results from this kind of shared governance is critical if innovations are to last.

Where schoolwide decisions are concerned, many successful schools create **faculty committees** that interview and hire staff, plan and implement professional development, and manage other functions that cut across teaching teams. These smaller groups of staff work on specific issues, soliciting input from families, students, or community partners where appropriate, and bringing the issues back to the whole staff when policy decisions must be made. This whole-school decision-making gives all staff members the chance to participate in the final decisions and maintains the coherence and unity of purpose in the work of the school. At some schools, committees and work groups have changing memberships to reduce territoriality and create opportunities for people to develop shared perspectives and learn from one another. In addition, all participants in the governance process receive leadership training so that decision-making is collaborative and skillfully executed.

Student involvement in governance is also common at successful schools, including universal participation in setting classroom and school norms and values, as well as representative participation on the kinds of committees previously described. This is especially true for hiring committees, where the presence of students not only leads to more informed decisions but also communicates an important value to prospective teachers. In addition, student groups regularly discuss schoolwide issues of concern and make recommendations; at the secondary school level, their purview is not just dances

and assemblies but also substantive teaching and learning decisions. Small learning communities or advisories sometimes elect representatives to schoolwide bodies to create more authentic representation. Through these activities, students develop new skills and learn to be responsible members of a democratic community.

Caregivers also are invited to participate in the governance process, and while many working parents may not have time for committee meetings that are not directly related to their child's education, it is essential for schools to cultivate **parent leaders** who can thoughtfully represent diverse parent voices in the decision-making process. Successful secondary schools have parent leaders who participate in school governance, hiring, and other areas, such as staff development and other activities that guide the life of the school.

In Practice: Shared Decision-Making

At Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez) in Los Angeles, the COVID-19 crisis provided an opportunity to put student and parent involvement in decision-making to the test. During the summer of 2020, Mendez administrators created opportunities for families, staff, and students to connect, reflect, and think together about how to plan for the coming year. When students said that the regular six-course semester schedule was overwhelming given the pandemic conditions, the local school leadership committee sought community input and decided to switch to a quarter system that would give students fewer classes at a time, with more time for in-depth study and support on fewer topics at once. When parents said that distance learning was difficult because siblings were often sharing a single mobile device and they did not have enough desks or chairs, Mendez staff provided each student with a laptop or tablet and allowed them to borrow furniture from the school. Mendez students were better able to weather the challenges of the pandemic because they and their parents had a voice in the school's decision-making processes.

Source: Thompson, C. (2021). *Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School: A community school that honors its neighborhood's legacy of educational justice*. Learning Policy Institute.

Agency and Voice

Within the frameworks established by shared values and school-level decision-making systems, effective schools place day-to-day decision-making authority as close as possible to the classroom, so decisions are made by those who best know the students and their needs. Just as many businesses today have clear standards and goals but allow work teams to have considerable flexibility as to how they reach those goals, well-structured schools establish academic standards and shared values, then give teaching teams the responsibility of making decisions and hold them accountable for student performance.

Faculty teams can design productive approaches to instruction. For example, at International High School at LaGuardia Community College in New York City, a team of four subject-area teachers (e.g., math, science, English language arts, and social studies) might share a group of 100 students with whom they loop for 2 years. Sometimes this team also includes a dedicated counselor. The educators have the authority to create their own curriculum units and daily schedules, and they have access to a budget

to support their work. In exchange, they are collectively responsible for the academic success of their students, as measured through the school's performance assessment system. This localized decision-making structure allows teachers to respond quickly and flexibly to changes in students' needs.

Eric Nadelstern, a former principal in New York City who launched this design, believes that there is a direct relationship between how adults in a school relate to one another and how they relate to their students. He explains, "If you have an authoritarian, hierarchical school structure, the teacher becomes the information dispenser in the classroom. If kids are going to collaborate in classrooms, then teachers have to collaborate in decision-making."¹⁵² Students also need to be able to make meaningful decisions. While staff play a critical role in establishing a supportive climate, the culture of a secondary school is at its heart a culture of the young people who make up most of the community. In effective high schools, students have a voice in every classroom, helping to shape the social and academic culture with the guidance and support of their adult mentors. Schools can seek to cultivate meaningful **student voice and leadership** by engaging students in curriculum design (see "[In Practice: Student Voice and Agency in Curriculum Design](#)"). Schools also can hold regular community meetings, either by grade level or within cohorts, where students can build connections, raise issues that matter to them, and work to solve problems facing the community. In addition, schools can offer students leadership opportunities, such as the chance to be peer conflict mediators and student leaders who host visitors or lead new student orientations and are tasked with the job of teaching newcomers about the school's values and approach to maintaining a safe and inclusive culture. A school's climate is truly safe and inclusive only when the culture is "owned" by the students themselves.

In Practice: Student Voice and Agency in Curriculum Design

Vista High School, a large comprehensive high school near San Diego, CA, has been redesigned into four small learning communities as part of its effort to cultivate a personalized and self-directed learning environment with a focus on students' social-emotional growth. Recently, 10th-grade teachers collaborated with their students to imagine what a cocreated semester might look like. The English language arts and world history teachers laid out the standards and non-negotiables, and the students added their thoughts and ideas as to how they might demonstrate their understanding. They put the characters of history and literary works on trial. To support teachers in shifting from the school's former traditional style of classroom organization, the school's leaders developed a cohort of **peer-to-peer coaches** who collaborate with teachers as thought partners to develop new ideas for building student voice into learning experiences.

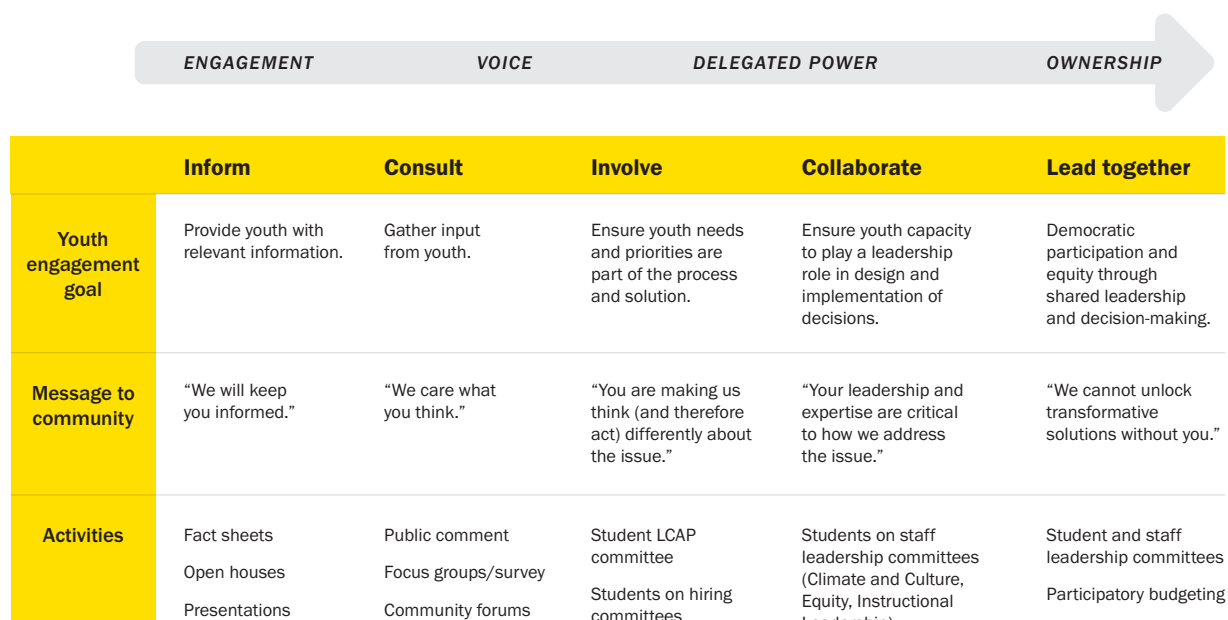
Students also have opportunities to direct their own learning as they experience the ideas they are studying. In one 10th-grade English class, teacher Stuart Easton engages students in grappling with *Lord of the Flies* by first leading discussions about the book's major themes—the collapse of society, the struggle for humanity in the face of chaos, the capacity for evil in all people. And then he leaves the room for a few days. To promote **student-driven, inquiry-based learning**, Easton directs the students to create their own society, as if they were on a deserted island like the characters in the novel. When he conducted the lesson, his students decided to form committees, elect leaders, and build a mini-society. Despite some initial chaos, and unlike the book, students organized themselves productively. "We got to make our own story, based on what we learned, and apply it to real life," said Deelilah Aivao, a 10th-grader in Easton's class. "We had power over the outcome of the project. ... It

gave us the opportunity to do something on our own rather than being forced to do it.” And what did students learn? A lesson that some people take a lifetime to grasp: “We learned that being stubborn can affect not only yourself but others too,” she said. “I absolutely loved this book.”

Source: Adapted from “The True Meaning of ‘Lord of the Flies’? Ask These 10th Graders” by XQ.

Traditional secondary schools often have elected student leaders but may lack opportunities for the majority of students to engage in shaping and supporting the school culture. Some districts have begun using tools to explore and assess the scope and depth of student agency and leadership in local secondary schools. For example, in Long Beach Unified School District some professional development opportunities—often cofacilitated by students, practitioners, and community organizers—have featured the Student Voice Continuum tool (see Figure 13), which helps practitioners consider how schools commonly seek to engage youth and the degree to which approaches may empower student agency. The continuum helps practitioners envision how they can shift from top-down approaches to those that more deeply engage students as partners in learning with valuable and necessary expertise. Moreover, it draws important attention to the democratic participation of youth of color to address issues of racial equity within school settings.

Figure 13. Student Voice Continuum



Note: The Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) is a 3-year plan that districts develop in collaboration with their constituents. The LCAP describes district goals, priorities, and expenditures and articulates how they work to support student success.

Source: Adapted from González, R. (2019). *The spectrum of community engagement to ownership*. Movement Strategy Center.

Equity design teams established at Long Beach Unified secondary schools gather administrators, parents, students, and educators to identify site-based equity dilemmas. To do this, they collectively gather and analyze “street data”—stories and observations from families and students—that inform school leaders

and educators about the student experience at their school and proposed changes to address these needs. Design teams like these create a culture of collaboration in decision-making spaces and facilitate the authentic exchange of perspectives and expertise between youth and adults. Moreover, they can be made more inclusive and participatory through processes that support rotating membership and by ensuring that students from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds and with varied levels of academic performance—and their families—are represented, as well as students with particular educational needs (see “[In Practice: Space for Student Advocacy](#)”).¹⁵³

In Practice: Space for Student Advocacy

Schools and districts can tap students’ knowledge and perspectives in program design and problem-solving that address their particular needs. For example, Kern High School District in Kern County, CA, offers Youth Empowering Success (YES!) clubs for groups of high school and middle school students in foster care. These clubs, which meet periodically with the assistance of a counselor or social worker, serve both as support groups for students in foster care and as forums in which the students can receive particular support or attend presentations by educators and other professionals on topics selected by the students.

By creating spaces for students in foster care to elevate and advocate for themselves, the clubs represent a powerful model of student engagement. YES! clubs can also involve field trips or other special events to help students in foster care participate in the community. The activities culminate with an annual conference attended by a range of interest holders involved in the support of students in foster care: foster parents and staff from foster family agencies, child welfare agencies, probation offices, juvenile courts, and other community organizations. Conference speakers include both adults and students in foster care, allowing for a two-way exchange of information, giving voice to students in foster care and their needs while providing a forum for connecting the broad array of agencies and organizations involved in providing that support. In this way, the YES! conference serves as a youth-led joint professional development opportunity for system providers.

Source: Burns, D., Espinoza, D., Adams, J., & Ondrasek, N. (2022). *California students in foster care: Challenges and promising practices*. Learning Policy Institute.

Not only do these opportunities for students create a more positive school climate, but they are essential for young people’s growth and development. In too many secondary schools, young people are only asked to follow directions and are never expected to help shape the school experience or make decisions. Adolescents’ opportunities for agency enable them to learn and grow into healthy adults. Research also suggests that choice and agency in secondary school classrooms helps maintain engagement in academics.¹⁵⁴

When a secondary school undertakes a school redesign effort, an important starting point is a robust needs assessment that is driven by families, including parents or guardians and the students themselves. This offers an opportunity to reinvent the school into a more humane and inclusive environment where all young people can thrive. While educators have expertise about teaching, families and students are the experts on their hopes and dreams and should be the ultimate drivers of the school’s vision and values.

Social Justice Humanitas: A Democratic Approach to Schooling



Photo provided by Social Justice Humanitas Academy.

[Social Justice Humanitas Academy](#) (SJ Humanitas) was designed by teachers and envisioned as a student-centered learning environment that functions as a true community school. The school has been guided by its commitment to shared leadership, accountability, and decision-making to ensure those individuals who are closest to students make school and policy decisions. SJ Humanitas was organized and approved as an [LAUSD Pilot School](#)—an innovative reform model that advances democracy by emphasizing self-governance and leadership. Pilot Schools are autonomous schools that were established in 2007 when a memorandum of understanding was ratified by LAUSD and United Teachers Los Angeles providing autonomies over five distinct areas: (1) budget; (2) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (3) governance; (4) school calendar; and (5) staffing. Site-based autonomies across these areas were meant to integrate to impact the schools' ability to innovate, provide equitable services for their students and families, personalize learning, and improve student outcomes through a collaborative network of interest holders. As of July 2020, there were 44 Pilot Schools that served K–12 students from every local district in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

To govern their autonomous sites, Pilot Schools have a **school-based governance structure** that allows a group of school interest holders (which can consist of the principal, teachers, other school personnel, parents, community members, and students) to set and maintain the school's vision and goals and make decisions about the school's budget, principal selection and evaluation, and programming, while ensuring that the school complies with federal and state legal requirements. This decision-making body, called a Governing School Council, also has the responsibility of establishing bylaws and school policies and approving the annual Elect-to-Work Agreement, which allows Pilot Schools to revisit their mission and vision and the teacher responsibilities required to fulfill shared goals. Through site-based decision-making, Pilot Schools can address students' needs through unique school designs.

SJ Humanitas's commitment to shared decision-making as an LAUSD Pilot School means that the voices of students, families, and community members are heard. Within classrooms, teachers work to creatively engage students and provide opportunities for them to direct their learning through

approaches such as **project-based learning**. Youth forums like the school’s Student Steering Committee provide every student with the opportunity to take part in educational planning and decision-making by sharing their feelings and opinions about their learning and the learning environment on a biannual basis. Further, students, parents, and community members participate in governance structures like the **Governing School Council**. As members of the council, students, parents, and community representatives assist in shaping school policy and take part in staff hiring and budget decisions.

Student voice is also heard regularly in “council,” which is implemented as a component of the school’s advisories and is defined by the school as “the practice of listening and speaking from the heart.” Council is a practice of many ancient and Indigenous cultures all over the world. Participants sit in a circle, where everyone’s voice and humanity are recognized. It is an egalitarian and democratic way to build community, connect with others, and practice attentive listening, which shapes many other settings for decision-making throughout the school.

Since its opening, SJ Humanitas has also served as a community hub—bringing together the resources and strengths of all interest holders to serve and support the whole community. Recognizing that both the assets and challenges facing the community penetrate the walls of the school, SJ Humanitas has forged strong partnerships with local agencies and organizations that aim to further strengthen and empower the community. According to one staff member, the capacity to both serve as a resource to the community and view the community as a resource is what makes SJ Humanitas a community school:

I think what makes us a community school is ... acknowledging that the things that happen outside of our doors will also happen inside of our doors. ... We have a responsibility to interact with the world outside of the campus. Being not only a resource for the entire community and for the families that are here, but also looking to them as a resource because we know that the best knowledge and the best practices that will help a community solve its issues are probably also in the community.

SJ Humanitas also works to connect students to community organizations to engender greater **community connections**, feelings of belonging, and support. Teachers develop partnerships with organizations that enrich their curriculum and encourage students to address issues in their community. For example, SJ Humanitas teachers have partnered with Action Civics LA, a nonprofit youth leadership organization that supports students’ involvement with their communities and participation in the democratic process. Students are challenged to create a plan to better their community and are invited to present their projects at City Hall. Past projects have addressed gun violence, homelessness, and immigration policies—issues that impact their community.

Through the Mikva Challenge—a national effort to develop empowered, informed, and active citizens by engaging young people in an action civics curriculum—students develop relationships with leaders in the community and participate in civic processes alongside teachers and other adults. These partnerships highlight SJ Humanitas’s commitment to serve as a social, educational, and enrichment hub by tapping into and building a shared sense of social responsibility across the region to assist the school in meeting the needs of the whole child.

Sources: Saunders, M., Martínez, L., Flook, L., & Hernández, L. E. (2021). *Social Justice Humanitas Academy: A community school approach to whole child education*. Learning Policy Institute; Ways of Council. (2020). *What is council practice?*

Additional Resources

- [3 Ways Administrators Can Include Teachers in Decision-Making](#), Miriam Plotinsky, Edutopia: This article describes approaches and structures that schools can incorporate to enable educators to participate in decisions that concern them most.
- [Educating for What? The Struggle for Democracy in Education](#), Deborah Meier: This article describes the purpose of education in a democracy and explains how practices such as Habits of Mind and Heart can help educate young people to be full participants in a democracy.
- [LAUSD Pilot Schools](#): This website describes the Los Angeles Pilot Schools, a network of public schools that have autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum and assessment, and the school calendar. These autonomies allow them to operate with greater flexibility in order to best meet their students' needs and to establish systems for shared leadership and decision-making.
- [Social Justice Humanitas Academy: A Community School Approach to Whole Child Education](#), Marisa Saunders, Lorea Martínez, Lisa Flook, and Laura E. Hernández, Learning Policy Institute: This report looks at Social Justice Humanitas Academy, a community school that advances student learning and development through its mission to support students on their journeys toward self-actualization, social justice, and postsecondary success. Driven by its structures and vision for teacher and community leadership, it maintains a supportive and inclusive learning environment, engages students in social and emotional development and student-centered pedagogical strategies, and provides access to integrated systems of supports.
- [Start With Diverse Shared Decision-Making Teams](#), California Partnership for the Future of Learning: This web page showcases how select schools have developed and maintained shared decision-making processes that incorporate the voices and perspectives of diverse actors to drive equity and change.
- [Striving for Relationship-Centered Schools: Insights From a Community-Based Transformation Campaign](#), Laura E. Hernández and Eddie Rivero, Learning Policy Institute: This report illustrates how select California districts and schools have sought to transform secondary schools by engaging youth as partners in driving change. Its findings on the systems and processes implemented in the Long Beach Unified School District especially demonstrate how students can be meaningfully engaged in decision-making, shared learning, and strategic planning.
- [The Transformative Power of Listening](#), Shane Safir, Jossey-Bass: This excerpt from Shane Safir's book *The Listening Leader* provides a framework for how school principals can effectively lead school change through shared governance.



Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

System Design To Support School Transformation

As shown throughout this publication, many studies have documented the practices of unusually effective schools and have uncovered similar features among schools that succeed with all students, including students who have historically been underserved. While much can be done to transform high schools by those faculty, students, and families who are their central members, redesigned schools require some essential conditions to be effective. In this chapter, we outline some of the lessons learned from earlier eras of school redesign and the policy conditions needed to create systems that can support and sustain schools that enable empowering learning.¹⁵⁵

Learning From Successful Innovation

Creating new schools and innovations is a great American pastime. Waves of reform producing productive new school designs occurred at the turn of the 20th century when John Dewey, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Ella Flagg Young, and others were working in Chicago, New York, and other Northern cities, and Black educators like Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Julia Cooper, and Lucy Laney were creating schools in the South. A wave of new school designs swept the country in the 1930s and 1940s when the Progressive Education Association helped to redesign and study 30 “experimental” high schools that were found, in the famous Eight-Year Study, to perform substantially better than traditional schools in developing high-achieving, intellectually adventurous, socially responsible young people able to succeed in college and in life.¹⁵⁶ Urban school reform movements occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, and hundreds of redesigned schools were created in the 1990s when the Annenberg Challenge joined with the Gates Foundation to stimulate efforts to redesign schools in many urban districts across the country, including Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City.

Successful efforts¹⁵⁷ have offered sufficient planning time and supports, including a learning process for all members of the community—faculty, students, and families—that included reading about, looking at, and experiencing the designs and change strategies used in other schools that seem to offer useful approaches, and talking to constituents in those schools. They also have recognized that a whole-school vision is needed, rather than piecemeal change, even if that vision needs to be implemented gradually over a period of years. For example, a large school may start phasing in a new model of smaller learning communities with entering 9th-graders, with clear goals and time frames for growing the model each year.

A growing number of new secondary school designs are offered by networks—such as Big Picture, EL Education, Internationals Network, Linked Learning, and New Tech Network, among others—that can assist those schools or districts interested in adopting or adapting specific models to their local contexts.¹⁵⁸ These networks enable districts and communities to understand, evaluate, assess, plan, and prepare for new approaches, offering learning supports and professional development along the way.

They have also created district-level supports that clear the path for redesigning schools, knowing that, even when they achieve better outcomes, distinctive school models confront long-standing traditions and expectations, including a geological dig of policies designed to hold the factory model in place.

New York City's success in sparking an entire system of redesigned secondary schools of choice was launched in 1989 by an invitation from then Chancellor Joe Fernandez for educators, parents, and community organizations to invent new school designs. This invitation was accompanied by awards of funding for successful proposals and supports from organizations like the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Center for Collaborative Education that offered already-successful models. This work was facilitated by an innovation protectorate in the form of the Alternative Schools Superintendency—which buffered schools from many regulations and forged new solutions to old bureaucratic problems—and by a rich array of professional resources in support of reforms. The resources included expert practitioners who created networks of learning and support; a large set of partnering universities offering expertise and intellectual resources; philanthropists; and researchers who provided additional professional and political support to these efforts.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) ran its own teacher center, and many of the teachers engaged in this professional development were involved in the new schools initiative. Over time, the UFT incorporated supports for reform-oriented schools into its contracts—first through waivers and later through changes in collective bargaining agreements—and became part of the protection for further reforms. Even when frequent changes in leadership might have led to abandonment of the new schools initiative, these forces kept the reform momentum going.

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) undertook a small schools movement in the 1990s and early 2000s—supported by the Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools—which created a number of innovative secondary school models. Shortly thereafter, OUSD adopted a whole-district approach to creating community schools, which, over time, led to districtwide supports for health care and other integrated supports in schools, then to supports for social and emotional learning and restorative practices. It led most recently to the integration of Linked Learning academies that offer community connections, experiential learning, and personalized supports such as advisory programs in many high schools. These strategies were supported by state policy shifts after 2013, and in the ensuing decade, graduation rates improved dramatically and OUSD became the fastest-improving district in California, continuing its positive trends even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sustaining Change

If redesigned schools are to become the norm, districts and states must move beyond the pursuit of an array of ad hoc initiatives managed by exception or waiver to a vision for whole child reform that guides fundamental changes in district operations and policy. Both school districts and state agencies need to take a systemwide view of redesign, rethinking regulations while building capacity and allocating resources in more equitable ways.

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Redesigning Districts

Throughout the 20th century, most urban districts adopted increasingly bureaucratic approaches to managing schools, creating extensive rules to manage every aspect of school life, ranging from curriculum, instruction, and testing to hiring, purchasing, and facilities, also creating complex, departmentalized structures to manage these rules and procedures. These approaches have often been reinforced by federal and state policies that add another layer of regulation, monitoring, auditing, and reporting to the management of categorical programs.

As a result, siloed bureaucrats have had the mission of administering procedures that often get in the way of practitioners' instructional efforts rather than managing quality by being accountable for figuring out ways to support success. If redesigned schools are to succeed, educators cannot spend all their time struggling against red tape. Just as many U.S. businesses have moved away from top-down, hierarchical governance, so too states and school districts need to set broad goals for outcomes and then give schools considerable flexibility to decide how to reach those goals. This means, within parameters that protect civil rights and student welfare, giving schools the opportunity to design key aspects of their programs and then holding them accountable for results. To create a new paradigm, the role of the education agencies at the local, state, and federal levels must shift:

- from enforcing procedures to building school capacity to enable student learning;
- from managing compliance to managing improvement;
- from rewarding staff for following orders and “doing things right” to rewarding staff for getting results by “doing the right things”;
- from rationing educational opportunities to a small number of students—whether selected by presumed ability or allocated by lottery—to expanding and replicating successful approaches; and
- from ignoring (and compounding) failure in schools serving the least powerful to reallocating resources to ensure their success.

To a large extent, these changes represent a switch from bureaucratic accountability to professional accountability; that is, away from hierarchical systems that pass down decisions and hold employees accountable for following the rules, whether or not they are effective, to knowledge-based systems that help build capacity in schools for doing the work well and hold people accountable for using professional practices that enable student success.

In a new paradigm, the design of the district office will also need to evolve from a set of silos that rarely interact with one another to a team structure that can integrate efforts across areas like personnel, professional development, curriculum and instruction, and evaluation, with the goal of creating greater capacity in a more integrated fashion. These supports should include:

- recruiting a pool of well-prepared teachers and leaders from which schools can choose—and building pipelines to facilitate their training for redesigned school practices;

- organizing access to high-quality, sustained professional development and resources, including skilled instructional mentors and coaches that schools can call upon and that can be deployed to diagnose problems and support improvements in schools that are struggling;
- ensuring that high-quality instructional resources—curriculum materials, books, computers, and texts—are available; and
- providing services, like purchasing and facilities maintenance, to school consumers in effective and efficient ways.

Where they incorporate choice that can enable schools to adopt distinctive approaches, districts need to ensure that all schools—and within-school academies or learning communities—are worth choosing and that all students have access to good learning opportunities. This means they must continuously evaluate how schools are doing, learning from successful schools and proactively supporting improvements in struggling schools by ensuring that these schools secure strong leadership and excellent teachers and are supported in adopting successful program strategies.

Districts will need to become learning organizations themselves—developing their capacity to investigate and learn from innovations in order to leverage productive strategies and developing their capacity to support successful change. Where good schools and programs are oversubscribed, districts will have to learn how to expand and spread good models rather than rationing them, and where schools are failing, they will need to learn how to diagnose, address problems, and invest resources to improve them.

If schools are to serve the public good, it is critical to guard against the emergence of a privatized system in which schools are separated by their ability to choose their students, rather than by the ability of students and families to choose their schools. For choice to work, districts must not only provide information and transportation to parents, they must also manage parents' and schools' choices so that schools recruit and admit students without regard to race, class, or prior academic achievement, both to preserve the possibilities for integrated, common schools and to ensure that some schools do not become enclaves of privilege while others remain dumping grounds.

Building Professional Capacity

Growing successful new schools or improving existing ones is not likely to be accomplished merely by a replication strategy in which external agents seek to transplant programs or designs from one school into another. Unless they are accompanied by intensive, long-term professional development support, such efforts can rarely attend to the nuances and implications of new strategies in ways that would permit strong implementation over the long run.

Building professional capacity ultimately requires investments in effective preparation, hiring, mentoring, evaluation, and professional development for school leaders, teachers, and other staff that is rooted in what we know about learning and development—and about the construction of effective school models. Initiatives like [EdPrepLab](#) support pioneering preparation programs for teachers and leaders that are designing new approaches to preservice training, while enabling groups like the [Teacher Licensure Collaborative](#) to support state policymakers in building principles for licensure and accreditation standards that are rooted in the science of learning and development.

Research in *Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning*¹⁵⁹ found that professional development school partnerships between redesigned schools and universities that prepare educators for deeper learning and equity provide a powerful approach to the chicken-egg problem of how to create pipelines of teachers for schools of the future. Prospective teachers learn effective strategies experientially as well as through their coursework and are more likely to succeed when they enter the profession. And when teachers have the opportunity to work in schools that provide professional collaboration time, embedded professional learning, and personalized structures that enable them to be more effective with students, they are more likely to stay. Redesigned schools that have developed such pipelines and offer strong collegial environments have many more applicants than they can hire, even when their districts have difficulty filling vacancies. When a surplus of well-prepared candidates can be hired in other schools developing similar practices, the schools and the profession benefit.

In addition, school systems can develop strategies for sharing good practice across schools. These can include disseminating findings from research about successful approaches; establishing networks of schools, teachers, and principals that refine and share practice with one another; and creating opportunities for educators to examine each other's practice and get feedback that can help them grow. These opportunities can enable educators to share departmental and schoolwide practices through collective professional development, observational visits, summer retreats, and pooling of intellectual resources.

Networks like the Center for Collaborative Education, Coalition of Essential Schools, Linked Learning in California, and the Pilot Schools initiatives in Boston and Los Angeles have provided intellectual resources, including design principles and resources for implementing them—curriculum materials; assessments; protocols for exhibitions, conferences, and other learning opportunities; and other school practitioners with whom to consult. Across districts, networks like those that support the Internationals High Schools, EL Education, New Tech schools, Big Picture, and others create partnerships between older and newer schools that provide models of curriculum, pedagogy, and school design. More established schools offer support networks for the principals and school directors; one-to-one supports for directors around decision-making and design strategies; curriculum materials; and staff development for developing curriculum, assessments, portfolio systems, and teaching strategies. Networks provide new school redesigners with many experienced colleagues to whom they can turn for advice, exemplars, and resources.

Managing and Allocating Resources

For schools to succeed with all students, they also need to be adequately resourced to do so. In the United States, disparities in funding between and among states, districts, and schools often leave those working with the neediest students with the fewest resources.¹⁶⁰ Some states and cities have begun to change this by allocating resources equitably on a per-pupil basis adjusted for pupil needs. The weighted student formula approach provides an added increment for students with greater needs (e.g., those with disabilities, English learners, students from low-income families, or those experiencing homelessness), determined by estimating the costs of educating these students to the state's standards. Schools serving large concentrations of high-need students may also receive additional funds to provide the services that so many of their students require.

Schools and districts also need the flexibility to spend their funds in optimal ways. Among the distinctive features of successful redesigned schools is the fact that these schools use the resources of people and time very differently from traditional systems in order to provide more intense relationships between adults and students and to ensure collaborative planning and learning time for teachers, as other nations do. As we have noted, the United States spends more of its personnel budget on a variety of administrative staff rather than on teachers directly. Whereas full-time teachers engaged in instruction comprise about 70% to 80% of education employees in most Asian and European nations, they make up less than half of education employees in the United States.

This is partly because of the variety of pull-out programs and peripheral services added over time to make up for the failures of a factory-model system rather than investing in the instructional core of expert teachers given time to work productively with students whom they know well. It is also because the United States has developed several layers of bureaucracy between the state and the school, made necessary in part by the dizzying array of federal and state categorical programs that schools are expected to manage because they are not trusted to make good decisions about resources. These categorical programs themselves create inefficiencies in spending—requiring administrative attention and audit trails, as well as fragmenting programs and efforts in schools in ways that undermine educational outcomes. Often these programs and other regulations prescribe staffing patterns and other uses of resources that reduce focus and effectiveness.

States and districts will need to encourage more thoughtful and inventive uses of resources by resisting the temptation to prescribe old factory-model requirements for staffing and uses of time and funds, and by providing supports for school leaders to learn how to design organizations that are highly productive and to use resources in ways that are likely to produce the desired outcomes.

Deregulating Strategically

A challenge in scaling up more effective school designs is that the century-old model of school organization that has shaped most schools is now reinforced by layers of regulations that often do not produce the most effective forms of education. Most state regulatory frameworks for schools—enacted through assumptions made by categorical funding streams about how staffing, programs, and materials are managed; via rules for counting seat time in terms of instructional minutes; via curriculum and testing rules; and through approaches to professional development—have not yet shifted to accommodate or encourage the designs made by new school models.

Where innovations are made possible by relief from regulations, they cannot spread unless the same regulatory relief is applied to other parts of the system. Federal, state, and local policymakers need to examine how to deregulate public schools strategically in ways that would permit greater focus and success while preserving core public values. Waivers from regulations are not enough: It is critical that districts and states allow innovators to help change the rules as well as to avoid them. Regulations protecting access and providing equitable allocations of resources should provide the foundation of a redesigned system, while professional standards and investments in professional capacity that allow educators to be trusted should replace efforts to micromanage teaching and the design of schools.

Rethinking Accountability

Finally, policymakers must create accountability systems that can foster innovation and student supports while holding schools accountable to the core purposes of public education—equity, access, development of citizenship, and progress in learning. A system that is accountable to students and parents should ensure access to high-quality learning opportunities while identifying needs

A system that is accountable to students and parents should ensure access to high-quality learning opportunities while identifying needs and engaging in continuous improvement to meet them.

and engaging in continuous improvement to meet them. Learning outcomes should be evaluated in ways that acknowledge schools' contributions to student growth and progress, rather than by rewarding or punishing school status based at a moment in time based on high-stakes measures that create disincentives for schools to admit and keep the neediest students.

Productive accountability systems should include indicators of students' access to educational resources: well-qualified educators; a rich curriculum; high-quality teaching and instructional materials (including digital access); a positive school climate; social, emotional, and academic supports; and expert instruction for English learners, students with disabilities, and other students with particular needs. They should also include indicators of learning and progress using rich performance-based assessments that measure learning in authentic ways; completion of well-designed pathways to college and careers; and accomplishments such as biliteracy and civic engagement, as states like California and New York have sought to do.¹⁶¹

Conclusion

Over the past 30 years, thousands of redesigned secondary schools have demonstrated that it is possible to enable much greater levels of success for young people, including those who have been historically left out and pushed out of opportunities to learn. Expanding these opportunities will require redesigning systems at the district, state, and federal levels as well so they can move beyond the limitations of the factory model. Creating systems that support the learning of all students will take clarity of vision and purpose, along with consistent action to create a web of mutually reinforcing elements that strengthen opportunities for relationships; provide environments of safety and belonging; support authentic and meaningful curriculum and assessment; explicitly develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills; facilitate family and student engagement and voice; and integrate community supports, making them readily available to remove obstacles to learning.

Additional Resources

The following organizations help schools engage in redesign.

- [Big Picture Learning](#) works with districts and school leaders to design schools that immerse students in interest-based learning experiences. These learning experiences are grounded in personalized courses of study and workplace learning opportunities that are supported with advisories, among other personalized structures, that strengthen relationships. To date, Big Picture Learning has

worked to create and sustain over 60 schools in the United States and supports more than 100 schools internationally with the goal of advancing equity and deeper learning in personalized and meaningful ways.

- [Building Equitable Learning Environments Network \(BELE\)](#)—a network affiliated with the National Equity Project—works with educators, policymakers, school support organizations, and other stakeholders to create equitable learning environments that are grounded in the science of learning and development. Guided by its transformation framework, the network aims to create resources and tools that support practitioners and decision-makers in transformational change. In addition, the BELE Network supports and convenes partners to share learnings from this equity-oriented change process and to elevate the ways that the field can make equitable learning environments a sustainable reality.
- [Center for Whole-Child Education](#) (previously Turnaround for Children) works to support practitioners in advancing and implementing whole child educational practices. To this end, the organization produces research-based tools for educators, such as a toolkit on how to use a whole child vision to assess and plan for tiered systems of support and resources to accelerate healthy student development and achievement. In addition, Center for Whole-Child Education works with schools, districts, and networks across the country, which, to date, includes training, coaching, and support to over 220 school leaders in 76 schools to help create healthy learning environments that catalyze success and well-being.
- [Coalition for Community Schools](#) is an alliance of national, state, and local organizations in K–12 education, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government, and philanthropy. It offers a range of tools and resources that can help educational leaders to build and sustain community school models and initiatives in their area, including opportunities to connect with technical assistance providers that can help communities improve their planning and management.
- [Coalition of Essential Schools](#) offers resources to support student-centered, equity-driven learning and accompanying school transformation. It also provides technical assistance to schools that have embraced the Common Principles.
- [EL Education](#) supports academic, social and emotional, and character learning across more than 150 schools that serve over 500,000 students. Through its work across the country, EL has created a range of free and open educational resources (e.g., curricula, videos, documents, books, and student work models) that can help educators create inquiry-based learning opportunities that engage learners and build their knowledge, skills, habits, and mindsets.
- [Envision Learning Partners](#) (ELP) helps educators, school leaders, and district officials build high-quality systems of performance assessment to engage students in rich and meaningful learning. ELP facilitates discussions among diverse teams to identify equity challenges and define the skills students need to succeed. ELP then works with practitioners to codesign high-quality performance assessments and build professional capacity to sustain that learning system. To date, the organization has supported work in over 100 districts and 45 schools to transform learning experiences for over 200,00 students.
- [High Tech High Network](#), developed by a coalition of San Diego civic leaders and educators, opened High Tech High in September 2000 as a small public charter school with plans to serve approximately 450 students. HTH has evolved into an integrated network of 16 charter schools

serving approximately 6,350 students in grades K–12 across four campuses. The HTH organization also includes a comprehensive adult learning environment including a Teacher Credentialing Program and the High Tech High Graduate School of Education, offering professional development opportunities serving national and international educators.

- [Internationals Network for Public Schools](#) designs, develops, and supports schools and programs for recently arrived immigrants and refugees. To date, it has partnered with 12 districts to develop 28 schools that meet the needs of multilingual learners through an activity-based pedagogical model that features collaborative, inquiry-based learning. In addition to supporting school development, Internationals Network provides professional development, offering practitioners experiential learning opportunities that simulate the effective practices Internationals schools use to support multilingual learners and to share best practices.
- [Linked Learning Alliance](#) is a coalition of educators, educational leaders, and community organizations that promotes the integration of college and career preparation for young people in educational systems. Specifically, it promotes the implementation of approaches that emphasize strong academics alongside access to comprehensive student supports and real-world learning opportunities that enhance students' skills and job-related knowledge. To advance this work, the Alliance works to grow the field's understanding of the power of Linked Learning experiences, elevates policies that can enable this pedagogical approach, and facilitates professional development that grows practitioner and community knowledge.
- [National Center for Community Schools](#) seeks to transform education by partnering with schools, districts, community partners, government agencies, and other stakeholders to create and sustain community schools.
- [New Tech Network](#) partners with school districts to support comprehensive school change centered on the implementation of interdisciplinary, project-based learning. To do this, the network engages district officials and practitioners in professional development that helps them build schools that implement project-based learning and consider how to spread this deeper learning model to other schools through a supportive policy and personnel infrastructure. To date, New Tech has worked closely with over 200 districts and schools nationwide and boasts high college persistence rates through its project-based learning approach.
- [Transcend](#) works with schools and districts to provide design and implementation support as they advance fundamental change to their school models. For practitioners beginning to design or redesign schools, Transcend provides coaching, research-driven tools, and other professional supports that guide practitioners through a research and development process grounded in equity and science. For those already engaged in school design, the organization helps leaders and educators understand and strengthen the conditions for innovation and effective implementation.
- [XQ](#) produces tools and products to empower educators, communities, and decision-makers to rethink and redesign U.S. high schools so that they better prepare youth to succeed in college, career, and life. These resources include XQ Knowledge Modules, which are step-by-step guides to engage practitioners in design thinking to spur innovative school transformation that is equitable and responsive to each school community.

Appendix A: Sample Budget and Staffing Models

Many educators know that schools with the design features described in this publication are likely to result in greater student success, yet they ask, quite reasonably, “Can we really do this within existing budgets?” This section includes sample budgets and schedules, which show that the effective school structures previously described are indeed possible to implement with existing resources. The examples also illustrate the trade-offs involved.

This appendix shows budgets and staffing models for two high schools: a large, traditional school with 1,600 students and a high school with the same number of students that has redesigned itself into four small learning communities of 400 students each. At \$14,000 per pupil, both spent close to the national average per pupil in 2020–21, the year these data were collected. The contrasts between the two illustrate how the redesigned school has reallocated resources to provide smaller classes and lower pupil loads for teachers, as well as significant time for teacher collaborative planning and professional development.

The staffing model for the large, traditional school is based on an analysis we conducted using data for traditional high schools in California in a large urban district, many of which employ only about 50% to 60% of their staff in classroom teaching positions. By contrast, the redesigned school, also based on existing school models, allocates over 75% of its staff to classroom teaching. Both school models have a principal, four assistant principals, and a librarian. Both budgets allocate just over \$4,000 per student for expenses pertaining to facilities, food services, and the like. Beyond that, the staffing models and budget allocations differ.

The redesigned school is subdivided into four small learning communities, each with 400 students, 24 teachers, 1 counselor, 1 resource teacher, 2 paraeducators, and 1 assistant principal. Most adults in the school serve as advisors, who take on frontline academic counseling and direct student support responsibilities with support from their small learning community team, including the counselor assigned to the small learning community. This extends the capacity of the counseling staff to reach all students on a more regular basis. Advisories have between 13 and 17 students each, depending on whether only teachers or other professional adults in the redesigned school serve as advisors. Because these students are seen daily, their needs can be readily identified and addressed, eliminating many dysfunctions that occur in depersonalized settings. When students need additional support, advisors refer them to the counselor or the community school coordinator, who makes connections to wraparound services provided by community partners.

In the redesigned school, special education services are provided through a coteaching inclusion model. Classroom teachers work with the resource teachers and their colleagues to design lessons to support students with Individualized Education Plans. The resource teacher and paraeducators provide push-in services. There is one high-need Special Day Class whose students integrate into general education for part of the day with paraprofessional support.

As a result of these design decisions, the redesigned school has fewer security guards, disciplinary deans, counselors, and pull-out staff engaged in programs designed to address the student failures that more frequently occur in the traditional factory-model school. This allows significantly more resources to be

allocated to classroom teaching. With the same number of students (1,600) and the same overall budget (\$22.4 million), the traditional school has 72 classroom teachers (55.8% of the total staff of 129), while the redesigned school has 96 classroom teachers (76.2% of the total staff of 126). This reallocation reduces the overall student-to-teacher ratio from 22.2:1 to 16.7:1, which allows for reduced class sizes and significantly increased time for educator collaboration and professional development.

Sample Budget

In Table A1, cost estimates are based on average California 2020–21 spending.

Table A1. Sample Budget

Fund type	Cost per position	Traditional school		Redesigned school with small learning communities	
		#	\$	#	\$
REVENUE	\$	#	\$	#	\$
Students	-	1,600	-	1,600	-
Per-student revenue	-	-	\$14,000	-	\$14,000
Total revenue	-	-	\$22,400,000	-	\$22,400,000
COSTS	\$	#	\$	#	\$
Principal	\$150,000	1	\$150,000	1	\$150,000
Assistant principals	\$125,000	4	\$500,000	4	\$500,000
Deans	\$105,000	2	\$210,000	0	\$0
Restorative practices deans	\$105,000	0	\$0	1	\$105,000
Counselors	\$95,000	8	\$760,000	4	\$380,000
College advisor	\$95,000	0	\$0	1	\$95,000
Community school coordinator	\$95,000	0	\$0	1	\$95,000
Department heads (full-time equivalent)	\$95,000	2	\$190,000	0	\$0
Resource and Special Day Class teachers	\$85,000	10	\$850,000	5	\$425,000

Fund type	Cost per position	Traditional school		Redesigned school with small learning communities	
		Positions	Cost	Positions	Cost
Paraeducators	\$45,000	8	\$360,000	8	\$360,000
Librarian	\$85,000	1	\$85,000	1	\$85,000
Other certificated staff (program administrators)	\$85,000	3	\$255,000	0	\$0
Dropout prevention and other classified staff	\$75,000	8	\$600,000	0	\$0
Clerks	\$55,000	5	\$275,000	4	\$220,000
Security guards	\$35,000	5	\$175,000	0	\$0
Classroom teachers	\$85,000	72	\$6,120,000	96	\$8,160,000
Benefits	45%	-	\$4,738,500	-	\$4,758,750
Other costs (non-personnel, district expenses, etc.)	\$4,400	per student	\$7,040,000	per student	\$7,040,000
Discretionary fund	-	-	\$91,500	-	\$26,250
TOTAL COSTS	-	-	\$22,400,000	-	\$22,400,000

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Appendix B: Sample Schedules

To illustrate different possible approaches to the design of a small learning community, this section includes a traditional high school schedule and two sample schedules for redesigned schools, each drawn from an actual school: One is a 6-period block schedule and the other is a 4x4 block schedule, each of which results in slightly different trade-offs using the same overall resources as the traditional school. (For an example of a redesigned school schedule using a 7-period day, and the thinking behind their approach and trade-offs, see the [Hillsdale High School profile](#) in [Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships](#).)

Each of the models features a weekly bell schedule, a student schedule, and a teacher schedule. A comparison of indicators illustrates how the decisions affect class sizes and pupil loads, as well as time for teachers. As a consequence of the differences in staffing and the changes in scheduling, the two redesigned schools offer class sizes of 22 or 25 (rather than 27), pupil loads of 66 to 100 (rather than 135) for each teacher, and an additional 3 to 4 hours each week for teacher collaboration time in addition to individual teacher planning time.

In many schools, an early dismissal time, often on Wednesdays, is used for student internship placements at local businesses or community organizations, or as club time for student-run or community-run activities.

Table B1. Comparison of Key Indicators

Indicator	Traditional school with 6-period schedule	Redesigned school with 6-period block schedule	Redesigned school with 4x4 block schedule
Number of students	1,600	1,600	1,600
Number of classroom teachers ^a	72	96	96
Number of courses students take	6 academic courses	6 academic courses plus advisory	4 academic courses per semester (8 per year) plus advisory ^b
Number of courses teachers teach	5 academic courses	4 academic courses plus advisory	3 academic courses plus advisory
Average class size	27	25	22
Pupil load per teacher	135	100	66
Teacher time spent teaching academics	23.8 hours/week	17.7 hours/week	19.5 hours/week
Teacher time spent leading advisory	0 hours/week	3.0 hours/week	3.3 hours/week
Teacher time for planning and professional development	5.9 hours/week	9.8 hours/week	8.5 hours/week

^a The sample budget in Table A1 shows how this reallocation is achieved.

^b Some courses, such as humanities and math, are taught as a double block for a full year to promote stronger outcomes.

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Traditional Schedules

In this traditional school model, students take six academic courses each semester, and teachers teach 5 out of 6 academic periods. The average class size in this example is 27 students. Teacher time spent in academic classes is about 24 hours per week, and time for planning or professional development is 4.75 hours per week, plus a 1-hour faculty meeting.

Table B2. Traditional School With 6 Periods: Weekly Schedule

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday		Wednesday	
Time	Period	Time	Period
8:30–9:30 a.m. (60 min.)	1st period	8:30–9:15 a.m. (45 min.)	1st period
9:35–10:35 a.m. (60 min.)	2nd period	9:20–10:05 a.m. (45 min.)	2nd period
10:40–11:40 a.m. (60 min.)	3rd period	10:10–10:55 a.m. (45 min.)	3rd period
11:45 a.m.–12:45 p.m. (60 min.)	4th period	11:00–11:45 a.m. (45 min.)	4th period
12:45–1:20 p.m. (35 min.)	Lunch	11:45 a.m.–12:20 p.m. (35 min)	Lunch
1:25–2:25 p.m. (60 min.)	5th period	12:25–1:10 p.m. (45 min.)	5th period
2:30–3:30 p.m. (60 min.)	6th period	1:15–2:05 p.m. (45 min.) (Early dismissal)	6th period
—	—	2:20–3:30 p.m.	Weekly faculty meeting

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Table B3. Traditional School With 6 Periods: Sample Student Schedule

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday		Wednesday	
Period	Subject	Period	Subject
1st period	Math	1st period	Math
2nd period	Art	2nd period	Art
3rd period	Social studies	3rd period	Social studies
4th period	P.E.	4th period	P.E.
Lunch		Lunch	
5th period	Science	5th period	Science
6th period	English	6th period (Early dismissal)	English

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Table B4. Traditional School With 6 Periods: Sample Teacher Schedule

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday		Wednesday	
Period	Subject	Period	Subject
1st period	Algebra 1	1st period	Algebra 1
2nd period	Algebra 1	2nd period	Algebra 1
3rd period	Prep	3rd period	Prep
4th period	Calculus	4th period	Calculus
Lunch		Lunch	
5th period	Algebra 1	5th period	Algebra 1
6th period	Algebra 1	6th period	Algebra 1
—	—	Staff meeting	

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Redesigned School A: 6-Period Block Schedule

This school’s block schedule has an A/B configuration that alternates throughout the week. At this school, “blocks” of extended class time run for either 55 or 105 minutes and allow deeper learning. Students take four core classes (English, math, history, and science) plus advisory, elective, and intervention classes. The average class size is 22 students. Wednesdays are slightly shorter and follow a more traditional schedule to provide teachers with time for professional learning, with each class running for 55 minutes. Teachers’ schedules have significant time for planning and learning: approximately 90 minutes embedded in each school day and an additional hour for shared professional learning after students are released early on Wednesdays.

Table B5. Redesigned School A With 6-Period Block Schedule: Weekly Schedule

	“A” Days (Monday, Thursday)	“B” Days (Tuesday, Friday)	Wednesday	
Time	Period	Period	Time	Period
8:30–10:15 a.m. (105 min.)	1st period	2nd period	8:30–9:25 a.m. (55 min.)	1st period
			9:30–10:25 a.m. (55 min.)	2nd period
10:20 a.m.–12:05 p.m. (105 min.)	3rd period	4th period	10:30–11:25 a.m. (55 min.)	3rd period
			11:30 a.m.–12:25 p.m. (55 min.)	4th period
12:05–12:45 p.m. (40 min.)	Lunch	Lunch	12:25–1:05 p.m. (40 min.)	Lunch
12:50–1:35 p.m. (45 min.)	Advisory	Advisory	1:10–2:05 p.m. (55 min.)	5th period
1:40–3:25 p.m. (105 min.)	5th period	6th period	2:10–3:05 p.m. (55 min.)	6th period

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

**Table B6. Redesigned School A With 6-Period Block
Schedule: Sample Teacher Schedule**

	“A” Days (Monday, Thursday)	“B” Days (Tuesday, Friday)	Wednesday	
Time	Subject	Subject	Time	Subject
8:30–10:15 a.m.	Algebra 1	Algebra 1	8:30–9:25 a.m.	Algebra 1
			9:30–10:25 a.m.	Algebra 1
10:20 a.m.–12:05 p.m.	Prep period	Algebra 1	10:30–11:25 a.m.	Prep period
			11:30 a.m.–12:25 p.m.	Algebra 1
12:05–12:45 p.m.	Lunch	Lunch	12:25–1:05 p.m.	Lunch
12:50–1:35 p.m.	Advisory	Advisory	1:10–2:05 p.m.	Algebra 1
1:40–3:25 p.m.	Algebra 1	Prep period	2:10–3:05 p.m.	Prep period
			3:05–4:05 p.m.	Professional development

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Redesigned School B: 4-Period Block Schedule

In this 4-period block schedule, courses are typically 85 minutes long, except on Wednesdays when all courses are offered for 50 minutes. A 30-minute advisory period is offered each morning as the first class as a way to greet students and check in with them right away. English and social studies are taught together as a humanities class. Students take three courses plus an elective each semester so they can focus intently on each course. In a 4x4 block schedule, students normally complete a full high school course in 1 semester and take four new courses the following semester. However, when students need additional support and consistency in a particular subject, it can be helpful to stay with that subject for an entire year. This is often how humanities and mathematics are structured.

Teachers teach 3 out of 4 academic periods plus advisory. Teacher time spent teaching academic classes is 19.5 hours per week, and time spent leading advisory (including student support) is 3.3 hours per week. Early dismissal on Wednesdays allows for a 2-hour professional development block.

This provides a total of 8.5 hours per week for teachers’ individual planning plus common planning and professional development.

Table B7. Redesigned School B With 4x4 Block: Weekly Schedule

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday		Wednesday	
Time	Period	Time	Period
8:30–9:00 a.m. (30 min.)	Advisory	8:30–9:20 a.m. (50 min.)	1st period
9:05–10:30 a.m. (85 min.)	1st period	9:25–10:15 a.m. (50 min.)	2nd period
10:35 a.m.–12:00 p.m. (85 min.)	2nd period	10:20–11:10 a.m. (50 min.)	3rd period
12:00–12:40 p.m. (40 min.)	Lunch	11:15 a.m.–12:05 p.m. (50 min.)	4th period
12:45–2:10 p.m. (85 min.)	3rd period	12:05–12:40 p.m. (35 min)	Lunch
2:15–3:40 p.m. (85 min.)	4th period	12:45–2:00 p.m. (75 min.) (Early dismissal)	Advisory + flexible support time

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Table B8. Redesigned School B With 4x4 Block: Sample Student Schedule

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday		Wednesday	
Period	Subject	Period	Subject
Advisory		1st period	Math
1st period	Math	2nd period	Humanities
2nd period	Humanities	3rd period	Science
Lunch		4th period	Art
3rd period	Science	Lunch	
4th period	Art	Advisory: 1-1 and small group support (2:00 dismissal)	

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Table B9. Redesigned School B With 4x4 Block: Sample Teacher Schedule

Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday		Wednesday	
Period	Subject	Period	Subject
Advisory		1st period	Algebra 1
1st period	Algebra 1	2nd period	Algebra 1
2nd period	Algebra 1	3rd period	Prep
Lunch		4th period	Algebra 1
3rd period	Prep or common planning	Lunch	
4th period	Algebra 1	Advisory: 1-1 and small group support	
—	—	Whole-staff professional development and collaboration (2 hours)	

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

These redesigned schedules are intended to stimulate thought and discussion about what is possible in different contexts. Schools serving larger numbers of high-need students should, and often do, have greater levels of resources than what is depicted here. Effective schools, including those mentioned in this publication, approach the trade-offs around resources in unique ways based on their context and their students’ needs. For example, some redesigned schools build in time during the week for students to participate in internships, service learning, community partner electives, and college courses; this requires additional staff coordination but enhances students’ opportunities while also freeing up additional time for whole-staff and team collaboration and professional development. The sample budget provided here is just one realistic example of how it is possible to allocate more resources to the classroom within spending levels that are common in public schools today.

Additional Resources

- [Rethinking the Allocation of Teaching Resources](#), Karen Hawley Miles and Linda Darling-Hammond, CPRE Research Reports: This report describes case studies of five high-performing public schools that have organized professional resources in innovative ways.
- [Reimagining the School Day](#), Meg Benner and Lisette Partelow, Center for American Progress: This article compiles five promising models to change typical school schedules, including schedules that have already been implemented across the country and teachers’ ideas for alternatives to the traditional school day model.

- [National Center on Time & Learning](#): The National Center on Time & Learning supports schools in planning for and implementing redesigned school days, adding more time for priority areas identified through the planning process.
- [A Bell Schedule Without Bells: Redesigning the High School Infrastructure](#), Abbie Forbus Everett, KnowledgeWorks: In this article, the author considers two alternatives to a factory-model schedule—Flex Mod Schedule and Asynchronous Schedule—that guide adults to build relationships with learners.

Endnotes

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