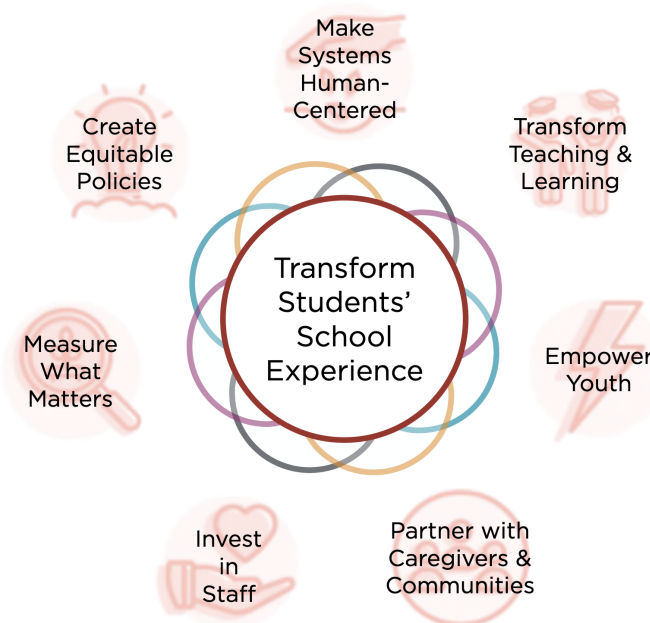


CREATING EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS THAT ALLOW ALL YOUNG PEOPLE TO THRIVE



Imagine schools as places where every young person is accepted, valued, and supported in their learning and development. This is at the heart of what matters to families in every part of the country.

In order for this to happen, schools must become places where every child is embraced and challenged. Schools must provide experiences and opportunities for every child to get what they need to reach their fullest potential. Ultimately, they must provide students with the space to learn the critical life skills needed to contribute to thriving local communities, vibrant democracies, and a just and peaceful world.

Many educators¹ hold onto this vision, but too often find themselves in an endless struggle against a public education system that limits possibilities for many young people as it reliably reproduces inequities based on race, background, income, and ability. This is because our outdated system is at odds with both the lived realities of young people and the scientific evidence about what students need to learn and grow.

Throughout our history and into the present day, schools have delivered the kind of supportive and affirming education required to learn in a completely uneven and

¹ Educators include: teachers, paraprofessionals, volunteers, deans, coaches, counselors, social workers, caregivers, family members, food service workers, custodians, security people, bus drivers, school leaders, office personnel, district administration and support staff, and community partners.

inequitable manner.² Persistent segregation, chronic underfunding, and most critically, an acceptance of the status quo are leaving students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, with empty promises, undermining their education, and artificially limiting their potential.

Public education today is fraught with political, economic, and racial tensions. School boards and state legislators are passing rules and laws that limit what teachers can say, which books children can read, and which ideas can and cannot be considered in a classroom.³ When we restrict the free exchange of ideas and suppress the exploration of American history or current events, we deny students the kind of education they need to thrive in our diverse, multi-racial society. An honest and inclusive education benefits every student by making them feel valued and accepted, and by helping them build critical skills that will prepare them for future success. Every student deserves to learn the true history of America and to critically examine both our progress as a country and participate in the work we have left to do. This requires that schools protect students' freedom to read challenging texts, to understand diverse perspectives, and to affirm the many people and experiences that make the American story.

The community of partners in the BELE Network is deeply committed to creating a public education system that delivers on this vision for *all children*.

HOW CAN THIS VISION BECOME A REALITY?

While schools have a responsibility for academic learning, the science of learning and development is clear that students' academic, social, and emotional development are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. This means that educators can't separate out a

²At the same time that Horace Mann argued for Common Schools that would bring together children of all social classes to learn together, millions of enslaved Black Americans were legally prohibited from learning to read or write (Anderson, 1988). Whereas White children of all social classes had access to public grammar schools since the mid-1800s, Black, Native American, Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese families in the US have each had to sue for the rights of their children to attend regular public schools (Spring, 1986). Even after communities of color secured access to public schools for their children, education remained largely "separate and unequal." When the US Supreme Court ruled against segregated schooling in 1954, most Southern states actively resisted the order. The Virginia legislature voted to allow districts to close public schools to avoid desegregation; Prince Edwards County closed its public schools from 1959-1964 rather than send White children to school with Black children (Bonastia, 2009). As Black schools across the South were closed in the mandated move to desegregation, almost the entire Black educator workforce lost their jobs as Black children moved to White schools with White teachers and White school administrators (Fultz, 2004). Even once students of color were fully integrated into American public schools, they continue to be much more likely to receive a substandard education and have much more limited access to coursework that would prepare them for college and careers. Funding disparities persist to this day. In 2019, school districts serving predominantly White students received \$23 billion more in education funding than districts serving the same number of students who were predominantly children of color (Camera, 2019) And now in 2023, laws are being passed that erase *all* of that history from the textbooks in American schools.

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³ See We Believe for more information: <https://www.webelieveineducation.org/>

young person's feelings, passions, or developing sense of identity from their academic growth, career preparation, or interpersonal skill-building.

The science also makes clear that each and every child has enormous potential to contribute to the world. Educators can unlock that potential only when they provide the kinds of experiences that allow students to bring their full selves to their learning, build relationships with a diverse group of people, and have access to opportunities that intrigue and challenge them.

Additionally, because of the inequality built into and perpetuated by the current American education system, it is incumbent upon educators to do the work of examining their individual contexts to determine which students are being underserved and systematically undermined. America's persistent history of racism and exclusion toward Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), requires that attention and care always be paid to these students and their needs. Educators must also identify the ways that the systems in which they are located have marginalized other students, including – but certainly not limited to – those with special learning needs or physical disabilities, low-income students, English language learners, immigrant or undocumented students, or LGBTQ+ students. By doing the work of naming the students who have been wronged within their context, educators can begin to make the changes necessary to transform all students' experiences of school.

[The BELE Essential Actions](#) are designed to support teachers, principals, district and state leaders, and community partners to use the power each carries to help create an equitable education system that enables the learning and development of all youth. This system would make space for students to thrive, allow them to be healthy and whole, and, ultimately, enable them to use their own power to lead.

All educators – and every student, caregiver, and community member – should be able to see themselves and their work in each of these Essential Actions. The Essential Actions are the shared responsibility of every member of the educational system to advance in their own spheres of influence – whether through direct implementation, policy development, or advocacy.

This is an opportunity to center the experiences of young people – particularly those farthest from opportunity and success in a given school or district – by ensuring that our decisions, actions, and designs are informed by their voices, needs, and aspirations. This is our central focus because how students experience school dictates their engagement, their effort, and their learning. Ultimately, the goal of our collective work is an equitable, just, and supportive education system that works for all students and families.

Building such a system requires all of us to:

- [Make systems human-centered](#)
- [Transform teaching and learning](#)
- [Empower youth](#)
- [Partner with caregivers and communities](#)
- [Invest in staff](#)
- [Measure what matters](#)
- [Create equitable policies](#)



MAKE SYSTEMS HUMAN-CENTERED

Design schoolwide systems and structures to center students and staff by prioritizing relationships, collaboration, and learning; allocating resources to support well-being; and identifying and removing barriers to equitable learning and development.

In order to create equitable systems that center young people and allow them to be healthy and whole, we must design systems and structures that promote positive relationships, collaboration, and student-centered learning.

In practice, this means reviewing all systems, structures, and practices from discipline and grading policies, physical environments, and scheduling, to curricular decisions, resource allocation, and decision making at all levels to ensure that the experiences, voices, and humanity of students remain at the center.

How to make systems human-centered:

- Create decision-making processes that provide all stakeholders with opportunities to be heard
- Create learning communities for adults and students that foster relationships and offer personalized support
- Work with all stakeholders to develop a shared vision of equitable teaching, learning, and development and use it to guide all school efforts
- Ensure schedules and learning opportunities are designed to prioritize student experience and learning goals
- Implement responsive and restorative behavior systems that support student learning and development and repair the harm caused by punitive systems
- Adopt grading and testing policies that prioritize student engagement and well-being, as well as learning



TRANSFORM TEACHING & LEARNING

Create learning conditions that transform students' daily experiences by prioritizing trusting relationships; integrating students' cognitive, academic, social, emotional, and identity development; and fostering critical consciousness and student agency.

How students experience learning is foundational to their pursuit of academic success. A positive learning experience does more than teach a new fact or skill – it can also make students feel valued, foster their sense of self-efficacy, or help them build trusting relationships with adults and each other. Educators must focus not only on academic outcomes, but also on creating the kinds of learning experiences that allow students to be healthy and whole.

When students feel supported and are given the space they need to explore their identities, they develop the skills that will enable them to grow into tomorrow's leaders and active participants in our democracy. This is the heart of what student-centered learning truly is: an education that prepares students to enter a complex world, armed with the cultural knowledge, self-assurance, and relationship-building skills necessary to lead successful lives after graduation.

How to transform teaching & learning:

- Ensure students' actual experiences and feedback are driving the decisions about curricula, assessments, instructional materials, etc.
- Use culturally relevant curricula that honors the contributions and struggles of different groups of people
- Create physically and emotionally safe learning environments that challenge students' intellectually while affirming their identities, especially BIPOC and other underrepresented students
- Provide students with regular, supportive feedback that affirms high academic expectations and acknowledges growth
- Connect with community partners to extend learning beyond school
- Use curricula that emphasizes academic excellence and holds high standards for student learning



EMPOWER YOUTH

Listen to, understand, and respond to the voices and experiences of students – especially underserved students and those from marginalized communities – to ensure they have agency in their learning and development and in the creation of a more supportive and affirming system.

Students are the most impacted by the decisions of educators. When shaping the experience of school, educators – from superintendents to classroom teachers – must be willing to share power with students. Listening to, understanding, and being responsive to student voices ensures they are able to engage in ways that support their learning and development and ultimately allows them to be healthy and whole.

When learning experiences are being designed – whether in an individual classroom or district-wide – it is critical that students have a seat at the table and their input is taken seriously. Students will cultivate a strong sense of agency, identity, and leadership skills by learning to advocate for themselves and their peers.

How to empower youth:

- Create structures to collect and respond to student feedback about their learning experiences
- Create structures for all students, especially those furthest from power and not typically involved, to participate in decision-making at the school, district, and state levels
- Understand and affirm students' identities – personal, cultural, racial, and academic
- Co-design learning experiences and systems for school improvement with students, especially BIPOC and other underserved students
- Prioritize the well-being and mental health of students by providing resources and support
- Nurture and build students' agency and critical consciousness, especially BIPOC and other underserved students, by giving them opportunities for self-directed learning and leadership



PARTNER WITH CAREGIVERS & COMMUNITIES

Partner authentically with students' communities – including their caregivers and families, as well as other community partners – to transform students' daily experiences, create a network of support for students and their families, and allow *all* to be healthy and whole.

It's important that educators partner with students' communities to create student-centered learning experiences that honor the humanity of everyone involved. Relationship-building, reciprocal learning, and co-designing with caregivers and communities is crucial to building a system that allows every student to be healthy and whole in the ways their communities value.

This also means that schools, districts, and communities need to authentically partner and collaborate to create a network of providers that can support not just students and families, but the schools themselves as they engage in the work of transforming students' experiences and building more equitable, humanized systems. This engagement will lead to greater alignment of opportunities and support for students in every facet of their lives.

How to partner with caregivers:

- Partner with caregivers to ensure that policies and practices are equitable and supportive of the unique needs of their students
- Build trusting relationships with caregivers that foster understanding and appreciation across cultures and other differences
- Align around a shared vision of student and community success and well-being
- Prioritize the well-being of students and their families in policy and resource allocation decisions, especially BIPOC and other underserved families

How to partner with communities:

- Identify and partner with community members and organizations to ensure continuity of support for students and families
- Build partnerships with community members and organizations, including local government agencies, that foster understanding and appreciation across cultures and other differences
- Respond to communities and their needs and wants when making policy and resource allocation decisions, especially marginalized communities
- Share information and resources with community partners and collaborate to create a web of support for students, families, and schools
- Create structures for consistent engagement with community partners – including other community members, community organizations, and local government agencies



INVEST IN STAFF

Create the conditions that allow all educators to fully engage in their work, feel equipped to form meaningful relationships with students, and to be positive contributors to students' daily experiences in school.

Educators should have the permission, support, and resources they need to design positive learning experiences for students. Policies designed to assist them in this work are critical to student success.

Educators must feel supported, valued, and prepared. Their perspectives and insights must be taken into account when decisions are being made that affect them and their students. Time and resources must be allocated for professional development to ensure they have the preparation required to create student-centered learning experiences.

How to invest in staff:

- Train teacher teams to work with various types of qualitative and quantitative data so they can engage in continuous improvement cycles with students as partners
- Ensure that staff, particularly BIPOC educators, are engaged in decision-making at the school, district, and state level on a variety of topics, including: curricula, assessments, and the design and delivery of professional learning
- Prepare educators to facilitate developmentally appropriate conversations about race, culture, gender, and other important topics in a way that empowers students and avoids marginalizing students
- Create structures to support the well-being of educators – providing time, resources, and opportunities to care for themselves and one another – so they are able to prioritize the well-being of their students
- Ensure professional development is grounded in holistic child development that centers the experiences and voices of students and their families and communities



MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

Establish systems to routinely gather, analyze, and respond to data on student learning and feedback students provide about their experiences, along with feedback from educators and caregivers; use these data to adjust practice, policy, and learning environments.

Data are critical for understanding the needs of students, caregivers, and school staff. While personal perspectives and insights are invaluable resources, the collection of quantitative and qualitative data provides educators with a more complete picture of individuals' needs, interests, and experiences.

With tools like Elevate, Catalyze, and Cultivate from PERTS and the University of Chicago, these data can be used to adjust policies and practices as needed. When teachers have access to student experience data and are given the opportunity to regularly review student feedback, they are then able to make decisions about their practice that are informed by students' actual wants and needs. Similarly, when schools consider measures of organizational conditions they can optimize professional learning and practice changes based on what educators are experiencing.

How to measure what matters:

- Engage teachers in the systematic use of disaggregated data – including quantitative and qualitative data on student experience, learning, and well being – to improve teaching and learning, by:
 - encouraging reflection
 - informing experimentation
 - enhancing equitable opportunities
 - transforming experiences
- Engage students in regular feedback cycles, including participatory data analysis, to inform instructional practice, school transformation, and policy making
- Establish structures (such as inquiry teams, student success teams, student voice committees, care teams) that use data to cultivate a culture of collaboration
- Collect data and use tools to better understand and respond to the experiences and well-being of students, caregivers, and school staff
- Include all stakeholders in data processes, including question generation, data collection, and data analysis



CREATE EQUITABLE POLICIES

Adopt district and state policies that advance equity by centering students' experiences, voices, and humanity.

District and state policies should be designed to make sure that students are welcomed into an environment that prioritizes not only their academic success, but also their identity development and well-being. District policies should be routinely reviewed – including through regular audits – to verify that they center the experiences, voices, and humanity of students.

This means ensuring that resources are being allocated equitably and effectively, students and families are engaged authentically, school leaders are empowered, systems and structures support student-centered learning and continuous improvement, and goals are aligned around a vision for an equitable, humanized system. Ultimately, policies should be adapted to ensure that all stakeholders are able to work toward actualizing each Essential Action.

How to create equitable policies:

- Ensure state and district accountability systems support equity-focused, continuous improvement processes at schools
- Create structures that require the authentic engagement of students, families, and communities in the development of state and district policies
- Incorporate students' actual experiences and voices into policy-making and resource allocation decisions to ensure they support students' safety, belonging, agency, and well-being
- Distribute resources among schools, students, and staff based on what each needs to achieve universal goals
- Ensure that state and district policies and resources support, and do not create barriers to, establishing the conditions necessary to actualize these Essential Actions and center the experiences, voices, and humanity of all students