CENTERING STUDENT EXPERIENCE

A playbook for improving student outcomes by centering student experience.

Nearly 50 million young people attend public schools across the country. With over 90% of our nation's kids in public schools, public education is the strongest tool we have to build generations of engaged citizens, innovators, critical thinkers, and future leaders. But like any effective tool, it's a work in progress. When our public school system was first designed centuries ago, it was intended for the needs of the 1800s. If we can reshape our public school system—to better meet today's needs and leverage the neuroscience behind how kids learn —we can catalyze a generation of students to thrive and succeed. This change is needed and possible. It is up to each of us to change the old system, today.

If we can reshape our public school system, **we can catalyze a generation of students to thrive and succeed.**

THE OPPORTUNITY

Research tells us that students are more engaged when learning aligns with their interests and needs. We also know that a student's daily experience in school—including how they feel and what they think—is fundamental to their lifelong well-being and development as a person.

> **A student's experience in school shapes their identity, perceptions, and beliefs about what they are capable of and their role in society.**

Unlocking the full potential of every student is not a mystery, but rather a commitment to creating learning conditions that help students feel valued, cel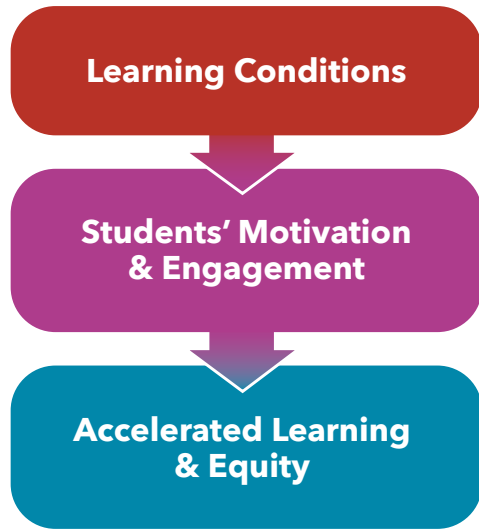ebrated, and accepted in the classroom.[1,2] We pave the way for better student outcomes when we prioritize creating **positive student experiences**— experiences where students feel safe, valued, and connected in their learning environment. This priority is often overlooked, but it should inform every aspect of school, from decision-making to funding to school design to teaching.

While our individual roles may differ, we each have a part to play in shaping the conditions that impact students' learning and experiences. Schools and leaders across the country have already started this work and are creating replicable positive changes. This isn't hyperbole, there are numerous examples and indicators proving that together, we can reshape our school system so every child is set up to reach their fullest potential.

[1] Measure Learning Environments, Not Just Students, to Support Learning and Development

[2] Learning Conditions are an Actionable, Early Indicator of Math Learning

What are learning conditions?

Learning Conditions

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Students' Motivation & Engagement

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Accelerated Learning & Equity

Learning conditions are experiences in the classroom that support or hinder a student's ability to learn. A strong sense of community in the classroom and schools, school work that feels relevant and meaningful, growth-oriented feedback and caring teachers are all examples of positive learning conditions.

KEY INSIGHTS

Based on years of research and practice across researchers, schools, leaders, teachers, and organizations in partnership through the BELE Network, here are three key insights that can guide your work in supporting every student to thrive.

1 **Student experience matters, is measurable, and directly contributes to the academic success and well-being of young people.**

Learning conditions are early indicators of learning outcomes. How students experience learning conditions in the classroom, from experiencing meaningful work to feeling like their teacher cares and beyond, dictates how much and how deeply they learn. With tools like Cultivate and Elevate, educators can a) **measure** how students experience key learning conditions, b) **identify** effective practices for engaging students, and c) **respond** to students' ongoing feedback about the impact of teachers' actions.

2 **When educators and leaders participate in repeated improvement cycles, they transform how students experience school and improve student outcomes.**

Educators and other leaders across the school system play a meaningful role in creating cultures of belonging and positive learning conditions that maximize student learning. When educators create space for students to share authentic feedback over time and work with them to decide what they learn and how, students learn more because they are more connected to their learning. School system leaders can **accelerate the pace of change** by prioritizing opportunities for adults to learn, try, and receive (non-punitive) feedback on new practices and behaviors.

3 **When educators, students, parents, and community members recognize each other as partners and collaborate to change policies and practices, student experience improves.**

Reimagining our school systems to create more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments can start with **authentic partnerships** among different stakeholder groups, including educators, students, families, and caregivers. Change happens when different stakeholders recognize each other's distinct contributions, commit to working towards a shared vision, and actively seek each other's input and feedback.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Explore, learn, and find your path to make a meaningful difference in improving learning conditions for every student. With distinct roles defined, examples of impact in action, and places to start, this section can serve as a roadmap to help you take impactful actions aligned with your unique position in the education field.

Navigate to your role:

↳ **Teachers**

↳ **School Leaders**

↳ **District Leaders**

↳ **State Policymakers**

↳ **School Support Organization/ Advocates**

Teachers

YOUR ROLE
Build strong relationships and collaborate with your students and improve the learning conditions in your classroom in response to their feedback. Use results from your classroom to bring colleagues on board.

IMPACT IN ACTION
Using Elevate Data to Make Learning Meaningful & Increase Engagement
Using "eye-opening" student experience data, a social studies teacher built their students' agency, a meaningful curriculum, and honest relationships with his students.

START HERE
BELE Impact Stories
Discover how teachers across the country responded to challenges in the classroom—from unengaged students to outcome disparities—by gathering specific, meaningful feedback from students to redesign classroom practices and shape better learning conditions that enable students to thrive.

Learning Partnerships
Learn about the role of Learning Partnerships between students and teachers as an approach to creating new classroom practices and routines that support students' learning and development of essential skills for success in school and life.

School Leaders

YOUR ROLE
Make decisions, school-wide or in your department, through the lens of what students do and how they feel in school. Provide time and incentives for teachers and colleagues to build community and authentic partnerships with caregivers, educators, students, and other stakeholders.

IMPACT IN ACTION
Dismantling Adultism and Inviting Students to the Table
When a student approached a principal with concerns over feeling policed in school, staff wanted to take action. Educators, staff, and students worked together to understand the implications of discipline systems in place and center student voice.

START HERE
Youth-Adult Co-Design and Design Partnership
Use Elevate, a professional learning program, to gather specific, meaningful feedback and data from your students that you can then use to adjust or redesign classroom policies and practices.

Using Student Experience Data to Co-Design Learning Environments
Examine how staff at a New York charter school ensured that students felt heard during the transition to remote learning during the difficult 2020-21 school year. Explore strategies that you can use to make students feel like they matter.

Cultivate
Leverage Cultivate to get school-wide feedback from students on their classroom learning conditions, mindsets, and motivations. Use data and resources from Cultivate to guide concrete steps in improving learning experiences and outcomes.

Elevate
Learn how teachers use Elevate, a professional learning program, to gather specific, meaningful feedback and data from students to adjust or redesign classroom policies and practices.

Catalyze
Use this data-driven tool to take stock of the organizational conditions in your department or school and take concrete steps towards creating learning-oriented organizational conditions that support the success of both your school and students.

District Leaders

YOUR ROLE
Make decisions, from funding to curriculum to policies, through the lens of how it impacts the experiences of students.

IMPACT IN ACTION
Finding Solutions Through Teacher Collaboration (Page 17)
After using Elevate—a student feedback tool—for several years, a culture of growth, learning, and innovation deepened in a New York school district. With support and buy-in from the district, teachers were empowered to use Elevate, resulting in improvements in student confidence, student ownership in their learning, and teacher caring.

START HERE
Measuring What Matters: District Policy
Delve into research-based themes that districts can use to support schools in measuring and responding to student experience, leading to learning environments where students can thrive. Learn from other school systems that have worked to implement specific strategies.

District-Level Learnings From the Field
Discover insights from CASEL and National Equity Project's (NEP) equity initiatives in partner districts. The brief sheds light on the conditions necessary to create equitable learning environments that enhance the student experience, and where districts should focus their efforts to sustain meaningful change.

Catalyze
Use this data-driven tool to take stock of the organizational conditions in your district and take concrete steps towards creating learning-oriented organizational conditions that support the success of both your district and students.

Cultivate
Leverage Cultivate to gather specific, meaningful feedback and data from students. This feedback can be used by school and district leaders to provide targeted support for teachers to adjust or redesign classroom policies and practices.

State Policymakers

YOUR ROLE
Ensure that state policies are supporting districts and schools to establish the learning conditions necessary for young people to thrive.

IMPACT IN ACTION
Building Classroom Community With Students
When a district supported teachers in creating time and space for students to provide honest feedback on building classroom community, student interest and engagement increased. Funding and guidance from the state can help enable districts to be more responsive to student experience at a broader level.

START HERE
BELE Essential Actions
Explore seven big-picture processes school systems can use to make changes necessary to create resilient school systems that foster the academic, social, and emotional growth of all young people and their communities.

Educational Equity in Action: Bright Spots
Discover four education bright spots identified by The Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University. These organizations and school systems are embracing equity-oriented principles—like prioritizing the student experience and redesigning classroom practices with student input—with promising effect.

Proposed State Policies for Supporting Student Experience
Consider these state-level policy actions while developing policies that center student experience. These policy actions are a starting point in creating conditions and learning environments that advance equity, academic excellence, and student success.

School Support Organizations/Advocates

YOUR ROLE
Collaborate with leaders and educators to implement best practices, critical resources, and research and create conditions that prioritize student experience.

IMPACT IN ACTION
Making Curriculum Meaningful by Connecting to Students' Identities
When an organization worked with 8th-grade social studies teachers across the district to examine ways to better connect with students and consider their lives outside the classroom, teachers saw improvements in several areas. Reports of students who felt their work was more meaningful and teachers cared increased. Students also felt there was an improved sense of community.

START HERE
BELE Essential Actions
Explore seven big-picture processes school systems can use to make changes necessary to create resilient school systems that foster the academic, social, and emotional growth of all young people and their communities.

BELE Impact Stories
Read actionable stories about educators and equity coaches from across the country responding to challenges in the classroom—from disappointing academic outcomes to unengaged students—by listening to students' voices and feedback data.

The Transformative Power of Youth Organizing Coaches
Learn about how near-peer mentors and Youth Organizing Coaches can help school districts listen to and respond to the experiences of students.

DIVE DEEPER

Dive into a curated collection of resources, tools, and case studies created by the BELE Network to support you in your journey. The resources are divided into five sections: 1) Foundational Resources, 2) BELE Learning Briefs, 3) Feedback Tools & Resources, 4) Case Studies, and 5) Select Supporting Research.

Use the icons to determine what resources are best suited for your role. **Click the hyperlinked resource titles** to navigate directly to the resource.

Key (recommended for…)

🍎 **Teachers**

🧭 **School Leaders**

🏫 **District Leaders**

✏️ **State Policymakers**

💡 **School Support Organizations/Advocates**

Foundational Resources

BELE Essential Actions
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Explore seven processes education leaders and schools can use to make the changes necessary for resilient school systems that foster the academic, social, and emotional growth of all young people and their communities.

Educational Equity in Action: Bright Spots
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Discover four education bright spots identified by The Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University. These organizations and school systems are embracing equity-oriented principles—like prioritizing the student experience and redesigning classroom practices with student input—to promising effect.

Measuring What Matters: District Policy
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Explore key themes and policy examples to inform district-level policies that can create the conditions for success in measuring and responding to student experience, leading to student thriving.

Proposed State Policies for Supporting Student Experience
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Learn about the actions state-level policymakers consider while developing policies that center student experience. These policy actions are a starting point for policymakers in creating conditions and learning environments that advance equity, academic excellence, and student success.

The Transformative Power of Youth Organizing Coaches

Learn how mentors and Youth Organizing Coaches can help school districts listen to and respond to the experiences of students. The brief explores four key insights on how the role can be implemented in schools to uplift student voices and support education leaders to partner more meaningfully with students.

Collaborating With Communities and Caregivers: Conditions for Building Authentic Partnerships

Explore how an elementary school in one of CASEL's BELE districts built authentic caregiver and community partnerships throughout a year-long project to transform an existing mural. Learn about three key conditions to sustain authentic partnerships among caregivers, community members, educators, and school leaders.

Insights from the Caregiver Community: Building Authentic School & Family Partnerships

Gather key learnings from CASEL's pilot SEL Dialogue Series for Caregiver-School Partnerships, which hones in on four insights towards creating authentic school-family partnerships. Each features a corresponding set of recommendations for school leaders.

Using Student Experience Data to Co-Design Learning Environments

Examine five key actions that can be taken to effectively implement student-centered data systems in creating learning environments where all young people feel seen, heard, and able to achieve.

District-Level Learnings From the Field

Dive into insights from CASEL and NEP's equity initiatives in partner districts. The brief focuses on the conditions necessary to create equitable learning environments that enhance the student experience, and where districts should focus their efforts to sustain meaningful change.

Youth Adult Co-Design and Design Partnerships

Explore a suite of key lessons and recommendations to help educators and other adults develop practices, tools, and mindsets to effectively partner with students to co-lead change efforts.

Learning Partnerships

Learn about the role of Learning Partnerships between students and teachers as an approach to creating new classroom practices and routines that support students' learning and development of essential skills for success in school and life.

Feedback Tools & Resources

Cultivate

Leverage Cultivate to understand how learning conditions in the school are actively shaping students' mindsets, motivation, and use of learning strategies. Use data and resources from Cultivate to guide concrete steps to improve learning experiences and outcomes. Find more Cultivate resources here.

Elevate

Use this professional learning program to gather specific, meaningful feedback and data from students to adjust or redesign classroom policies and practices.

Catalyze

Understand and improve the organizational conditions in your department, school, district, or other teams through this data-driven survey tool aimed at making progress toward learning-oriented organizational conditions that support equitable student success.

Transferable Insights: Recommendations For Successful Implementation of Student Experience Surveys

Explore a set of guides on the recommended practices and conditions schools and districts need to create to successfully implement student experience surveys. Also learn about solutions to challenges leaders or teachers encounter when centering students in schools.

Case Studies

BELE Impact Stories

Read stories about how educators from across the country responded to challenges in the classroom—from disappointing academic outcomes to unengaged students—by listening to students' voices and feedback data.

Elevate in Action: West Buffalo Charter School

Examine how staff at a New York charter school ensured that students felt heard during the transition to remote learning during the difficult 2020-21 school year. Gather strategies educators can employ to make students feel like they matter.

Elevate in Action: The Network for College Success and Chicago Public Schools

Explore how teachers in Chicago successfully used Elevate to incorporate students' voices and address teacher burnout and promote continuous improvement in the classroom.

Elevate in Action: Bank Street Ed Center

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See how staff in Yonkers, NY acted on student feedback from Elevate to support deeper learning in math classes. Several schools made significant progress and saw improvements in other learning conditions as well.

Partner with BIPOC Youth to Make School Better for Everyone

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Discover the journey of one teacher to embrace equitable classroom practices and experience using Elevate, a professional learning program. Through the survey, this educator was able to redesign his teaching to make classwork more meaningful to his students.

Select Supporting Research

Learning Conditions Are An Actionable, Early Indicator of Math Learning

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Understand how educators can accelerate learning by creating motivating classroom conditions. Highlighting the relationship between math achievement and learning conditions, this research found that students were ~2x more likely to earn an A or B in math when they experienced teacher caring, meaningful work, and feedback for growth.

Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework

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Discover how, where, and when the "key factors" to success develop from early childhood through young adulthood. This report emphasizes the kinds of experiences and supportive relationships that guide the positive development of these factors—and offers adults the most promising window for positive intervention.

Supplemental resource: "Foundations for Young Adults Success & Developmental Experiences Wheel 2.0"

Measure Learning Environments, Not Just Students, to Support Learning and Development

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Explore how schools can systematically ensure that they provide every student with the developmental experiences they need to succeed and thrive by measuring learning environments.

Looking for more resources to support your journey in improving student experience?

Head over to the BELE Library to explore a curated selection of resources and recommendations from the best and brightest in the field.

The Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) Network is a diverse group of organizations working together to advance equity in education. We share a bold vision of thriving youth, families, caregivers, and communities – and of education systems that foster academic, social, emotional, and cognitive growth and well-being for all. We believe we can create an education system focused on students, one that prioritizes their learning experience and ensures that they feel valued, engaged, and connected in the classroom. To learn more, visit belenetwork.org.

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